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WILD WEST



A MAGAZINE CONTAINING STORIES, SKETCHES ETC. OF WESTERN LIFE.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Application made for Second Class Entry at the N. Y. Post Office.

No. 208.

NEW YORK, OCTOBER 12, 1906.

Price 5 Cents.

YOUNG WILD WEST'S ROYAL FLUSH; OR, ARIETTA AND THE GAMBLERS. *By AN OLD SCOUT.*



The two gamblers were caught dead to rights. Charlie covered one, while Wild held the other.

"It is in his coat pocket, Et," Wild said. "Take out your watch. The galoot is a road agent, as well as a gambler."

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YOUNG WILD WEST'S ROYAL FLUSH

OR,

ARIETTA AND THE GAMBLERS

BY AN OLD SCOUT.

CHAPTER I.

ARIETTA AND THE ROAD AGENT.

Crack!

The sharp report of a rifle rang out on the still evening air and a fat young buck leaped from a crag and came tumbling down a rocky incline.

"That was a pretty fair shot, for it is easily a hundred yards from here to the spot where the deer was standing. We need some venison, for we haven't tasted any in a week. Hop, I will go with you and help you skin it. We may as well finish the job we have begun."

The speaker was a handsome blonde girl of seventeen or eighteen. She was attired in a fancy riding costume that fitted her perfect form and set off her grace and beauty to the very best advantage.

Her remarks were addressed to a Chinaman, who was standing near her.

The girl had fired the shot that brought down the buck, and now she wanted the honor of helping to bring in the haunches of venison.

The sun had set several minutes before, and darkness was gradually falling upon the Rocky Mountains.

Two or three hundred feet below the point where the girl and Chinaman were standing a campfire was burning, and one could have easily guessed that the two belonged to that camp, for it was a wild part of the country, close to the dividing line of Wyoming and Colorado.

At the time of which we write it was quite dangerous

to travel over the trail that led from Elkhorn to Cheyenne, for outlaws and treacherous Indians were to be met with when least expected, and bands of road agents preyed upon the stage-coaches that ran to and fro.

The distance between the two places was about forty-five miles, as the crow flies, but the trail wound in and out, and made it about fifty, making it just about all four horses hitched to a heavy stage-coach could do between suns.

"Did you get him, Et?" a voice called out from the camp below.

"Yes," replied the girl. "Stay right where you are, Wild. Hop and I will bring in the game."

Then she started for the spot where the deer had fallen, the Celestial running to keep up with her.

Rifle in hand, the fair young huntress leaped from boulder to boulder, and tripped gracefully over the few level spots she came to.

The buck had dropped into a little hollow that was almost surrounded by hanging vines and tall bushes, and as a hill intervened, the camp could not be seen from the spot.

"Where um deer fallee, Missy Aletta?" asked the Chinaman, as he saw the girl looking around for it.

"Right here, as near as I could tell from where I stood when I fired, Hop," she replied. "I guess I had better help you get him on your shoulder, and then you can carry the game in. We will let Charlie do the skinning at the camp. Ah, here it is!"

She had suddenly come upon the buck, which was still quivering in the throes of death.

Hop, as he was called, rushed up and gave a nod of satisfaction.

The two then stooped to lift the buck, so he could get it over his shoulder.

But before they could lift the slain animal from the ground a low voice exclaimed:

"Wait a minute!"

The girl and the Chinaman quickly arose.

Before them stood a masked man, a revolver in his hand.

"I advise you both to keep perfectly quiet," he said, in the same low tone of voice. "I am not here to harm you, miss; I simply want your money and valuables. However, I care nothing for a human life, and if either of you utter a cry that can be heard in the camp near by I will shoot you both dead where you stand! I am Greg Green, the captain of the road agents of the Cheyenne Trail!"

There was nothing but astonishment depicted on the face of the beautiful girl.

Not the least sign of fear was shown by her.

She had been taken completely by surprise, yet she showed no signs of being afraid.

The Chinaman promptly held up his hands, for it was not his first experience with road agents, and he knew what was best for him.

A road agent hardly regards the life of a Chinaman as being worth much, anyhow.

"You are a sensible heathen, it seems, and you show that you think that life is worth the living," went on the masked villain.

Then he stepped up close to the girl, and the muzzle of his revolver almost touched her head.

"I will take this," he said, and then he took hold of a little gold chain, and pulled a handsome watch that was set with diamonds from a pocket in the red velvet waist she wore.

The girl's eyes flashed dangerously, but she evidently thought he was enough of a scoundrel to shoot her, so she said nothing.

"Have you any money about you, miss?" the road agent asked, as he slid the watch in his pocket.

"No!" she answered, rather loudly.

"Hush! I don't want to have the blood of such a pretty creature as you are on my hands. I mean what I say, girl."

There was no mistaking his meaning, so she remained perfectly quiet.

"What have you got that is worth taking, you heathen?" And the masked villain directed his gaze at the Chinaman, still keeping the revolver leveled at the girl's head.

It was evident that, of the two, he thought her the most dangerous to handle.

"Me gottee two dollee," faltered the Celestial, acting as though it would almost break his heart to part with it.

The road agent laughed softly.

"I rather think you are telling the truth, so I won't bother to search you. You may keep your two dollars. This pretty little watch will do me just now. I shall make it a present to my sweetheart, who lives in Cheyenne. Good-night, miss!"

As quickly as he had come he disappeared in the bushes, leaving the girl and the Chinaman standing there.

So softly did the villain walk away that they could not hear his footsteps.

"Lat velly badee, Missy Alietta," ventured the Celestial, in a voice of sympathy.

The words seemed to bring the girl fully to herself again.

Holding her rifle ready to shoot, she darted into the bushes where the robber had disappeared.

But at that moment the clatter of receding hoofs was heard, and then she knew that he was gone.

There was a narrow pass running through a ridge of earth and rock right there, and it was through this he had rode.

But she ran to it, and tried to catch a glimpse of the horse and rider.

But this was impossible, for the pass took a turn to the left, and that made it impossible to see through it.

"I guess we had better get back to the camp and report, Hop," the girl observed, coolly. "I have lost my watch, and I would not have sold it for a thousand dollars. But never mind! If Wild don't get it back for me I will miss my guess."

The Celestial nodded, and then he started to leave without taking the slain buck.

"I guess we will carry out the programme as it was intended, Hop," she said. "Just get the deer on your shoulder. It is hardly likely that we will be interfered with this time."

"Allee light, Missy Alietta."

She helped him, and when the carcass was balanced on his shoulder they set out for the camp.

Only once did the fair girl turn and look at the spot where she had been robbed of her watch.

She did not expect to see the robber even then, but she could not resist taking another look at the place.

They were not long in getting to the camp.

"What kept you so long, Et?" asked a dashing-looking boy with a wealth of chestnut hair hanging over his shoulders, as he stepped from the camp to meet them. "Was it further off than you expected, or was it hard to get where the buck fell?"

"It was easy enough to get there, Wild, but after we did get there we were surprised by a masked man, and he took my watch," she replied, calmly.

"What!"

The dashing young fellow looked at her in amazement.

"It is a fact, Wild. I was robbed of my pretty watch, and right within your hearing, at that."

A tall man with long black hair and a mustache of the

same hue leaped forward as though he had been shot out of a cannon.

He was closely followed by a boy and a young woman in her twenties, and a girl in her teens.

They were all the picture of astonishment.

A Chinaman greatly resembling the one carrying the slain deer remained standing by the campfire, but he, too, evinced surprise at what had been said.

Right here we may as well let the reader know who all these people were.

They were Young Wild West, the Champion Deadshot of the West, and his friends.

Young Wild West was, without doubt, the best-known hero of the Wild West that has ever been written of.

He and his two partners, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart, had experienced more thrilling adventures and hair-breadth escapes than falls to the lot of ordinary people, and they had become so used to that sort of life that they were always traveling about the wilds of the great West, looking for fortune and adventure.

Cheyenne Charlie was the tall man spoken of. He was an experienced scout and Indian fighter, but he relied upon the judgment of Young Wild West at any and all times.

Cool under any conditions, as brave as a lion, quick as a panther, and true as steel, it was no wonder that the young deadshot was called a hero.

Jim Dart, the other boy, had been born and reared on the frontier, and knew much of woodcraft, but he did not think he half compared with Young Wild West.

The beautiful girl, who had shot the buck and then been robbed of her diamond-studded gold watch, was Arietta Murdock, the sweetheart of Young Wild West; the young woman was Anna, the wife of Cheyenne Charlie, and the other girl was Jim Dart's sweetheart, a very pretty brunette, rather delicate looking, but strong and hardy, for all that.

The two Chinamen were the servants of the party, and good ones they were, too, as will be seen later on.

Young Wild West listened calmly to his sweetheart's recital of what had happened to her.

It was now getting so dark that the shadows were deepening in the distance, while the stars were beginning to show in the blue vault overhead.

Curious-shaped peaks and jagged rocks loomed up on all sides of the camp, and the moving clouds that hung over them made them appear fantastic and unreal.

There was a sort of charm about it all, but our friends had no eyes for such things just then.

They were all thinking of the daring robbery that Arietta was the victim of.

"So he said his name was Greg Green, and that he is the captain of a gang of road agents, eh?" Young Wild West remarked, when the girl had told her story. "Well, I am glad he was kind enough to let you know who he was. That will help us to get him. Et, don't be a bit alarmed about your pretty little watch; it is not likely

that the villain will do any harm to it. I'll guarantee to get it back for you, and that before many hours. There is no use in trying to find Greg Green just now, for he is no doubt in some hidden retreat by this time. The fact that he was alone makes it almost certain that his headquarters are not far away."

"That's right," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie. "Ther measly coyote might think that he done a mighty smart thing, but he'll find out that he has got up agin ther stiffest game he ever played in his life, I reckon."

"He must be a new hand in these parts," remarked Jim Dart. "I don't remember of having heard the name Greg Green before."

"Oh, they come and go, such fellows as he is," answered Young Wild West. "When it gets too warm in one place they go to another. By and by we will take a little scout around and see if we can locate him. It may be that he has camped with his followers along the trail, the same as we have."

Our friends had left Cheyenne at noon that day, and as it was sunset before they found a spot to camp that just suited them, they had not yet had their supper.

Arietta had caught a glimpse of the buck as it was trotting along at the top of a cliff, and picking up her rifle, she had called Hop, the Chinaman, to follow her and bring in the game after she brought it down with a bullet.

Of course, they did not intend to eat any of the meat of the buck that night.

The animal heat would leave it by morning, and then it would be fit to eat.

Cheyenne Charlie undertook the task of skinning the animal, and being an adept at that sort of business, he soon had it done.

The skin was saved, and what they did not want of the carcass was tossed over a near-by cliff.

Meanwhile the Chinaman, who had remained standing by the fire while Arietta was telling her story, had resumed his work of getting the evening meal ready.

He was the cook of the party, and he bore the name of Wing Wah.

Hop Wah, the other, was his brother, and though they looked alike, they were not in disposition, intelligence, or anything else, save that they were both human beings with yellow skins and long queues.

Wing was a simple-minded, every-day Chinaman, and Hop was as shrewd as anything that had ever crossed the Rocky Mountains. He was a very clever sleight-of-hand performer, an expert gambler, and he liked whisky.

Besides these accomplishments, he could lie faster than an Indian pony could canter, and do a little stealing, just for the fun of it, once in a while.

But he had rendered valuable service to Young Wild West and his friends, playing the part of a life-saver on more than one occasion, and that made him solid with them.

Hop had a way of happening around just when he was

wanted, and though he was no fighter, he could do a few things sometimes which answered the purpose.

There was lots of fun to be had with him, for he liked foolish horse-play, and was always ready to perform his magic tricks.

He felt a bit sheepish because he had stood by and allowed Arietta to be robbed, but he had been so badly surprised that there was really no chance for him to interfere without making his death certain.

"Me meet um load agent some timee," he said as he was left to keep a watch, while the rest ate their evening meal, "len me showee lat me no 'flaid."

CHAPTER II.

SILVER BOOM, THE NEW MINING CAMP.

Young Wild West and Cheyenne Charlie left Jim Dart in charge of the camp after supper was eaten, and started out to try and find out where Greg Green was.

That he had a gang with him somewhere was evident from what he had told Arietta.

But the two searched around for nearly an hour without finding any traces of the villain.

Then they returned to the camp.

Young Wild West and his friends always made it a point to keep a guard during the night, no matter where they were camping.

If it was in a mining camp, right near the shanties of the miners, they did it; and if it was out on the plains in a hostile Indian country they kept a watch.

Experience had taught them that they could never tell just when danger would come.

Our hero had made enemies, because he always stuck out for the right.

Anyone who does that is bound to make enemies. There were many who would have been glad to get the chance to shoot him down from behind, but they were afraid to face him and fight out the grudge on the square.

Wild and his two partners always took turns at keeping awake through the night.

Jim Dart was left to do duty until eleven o'clock.

Then Charlie would get up and stay on until half-past two, and Wild would watch the rest of the night.

This arrangement gave them all the sleep they needed, for they had learned to sleep sound when they did sleep, and that gave them all the benefits required.

The night passed without an interruption.

When six o'clock arrived all hands were up.

Our friends had never traveled this particular trail before, so they did not know exactly how far they were away from a settlement or mining camp.

They knew that the distance over the trail from Cheyenne to Elkhorn was about fifty-five miles, but they had

not inquired as to whether there was any place on the way.

They were about twenty-five miles from Cheyenne when they went into camp the night before.

After breakfast, in which venison steaks played the leading part, they were ready to pack up and be off.

The trail was but a few yards from the camp, so when the pack-horses had been loaded by the two Chinamen our hero and his friends mounted and set out, proceeding in a southwest direction.

The steed Young Wild West rode was one of the most magnificent specimens of horseflesh to be found in the whole West.

It was a sorrel stallion that had been broken to the saddle by the boy himself, and since that time Spitfire, as he had named him, had been a faithful companion, and had carried him on more than one perilous ride to safety.

The others all had as good horses as money could buy, so it will be seen that they were very finely equipped.

The trail ran over ground that was fit for the stage-coach, so that made the way pretty clear for them, mounted, as they were.

"Just get a good jog on the pack-horses, you heathen galoots!" said Cheyenne Charlie. "I see fresh hoof-prints, so that makes me think that ther measly coyote what robbed Arietta of her watch has gone this way with his gang."

Wild had seen the fresh hoof-prints, too, but he had said nothing.

He was of the same opinion as the scout.

But the funny part of it was that the prints had not shown until they got a hundred yards south of their camping place.

This would make it appear that the horsemen had left the trail in order to get around our friends, or else they had come from a different direction across the country.

All hands took a look at the hoof-prints now, and many were the comments.

"I hope Greg Green has gone this way, Wild," said Arietta. "It must be that he has several with him, though, and what if they should ambush us? He has my watch, but it may be that he wants what money there is in our party."

"Well, if he does, Et, he will keep right on wanting," was the reply. "As far as an ambush is concerned, I guess we will be able to prevent that. The prints we see were made by horses at a walk at the first go-off, but now you can easily tell that the horses were on a gallop. When we come to them, where they show that the horses were walking again, we will slow down. Then I will go ahead and see whether the horses have left the trail or not. If they have we may expect that they are waiting for us. The ground is pretty soft and dusty here, and the dew has not dried up yet. That is what shows that the hoof-prints have been made but a short time ago."

Wild knew just what he was talking about, and the rest knew it, too.

YOUNG WILD WEST'S ROYAL FLUSH.

They followed the trail for about five miles, and then they suddenly came to a fork where there was a new trail leading off to the right.

Though wheel ruts could be seen, it was not the regular stage-coach trail.

As our friends came to a halt to ascertain which way the band of horsemen had gone they suddenly noticed a crude sign-board with a hand pointing to the right.

Beneath the hand was the following:

“5 MILES TO SILVER BOOM,
“THE NEW CAMP.”

Young Wild West gave a nod of satisfaction.

“If the fresh hoof-prints lead to the new camp, there's where we will go,” he said.

Cheyenne Charlie quickly dismounted.

The ground was rather hard and stony there, but in spite of this he was less than a minute in finding out that the horsemen had turned on the right fork.

As he reported to that effect the question was settled right away.

So they headed for the place that was called Silver Boom, according to the sign.

Half a mile on the new trail they came to the soft ground again, and then they could see that those who were riding ahead of them had their horses on a gallop, which meant that they were hurrying to get to their destination.

“Ther measly coyotes is ridin' right inter ther camp, I reckon,” remarked the scout.

“If they have kept right on going they must be there by this time,” answered Jim Dart.

“That's right,” nodded Wild. “Well, we will see if Arietta can pick out the villain who stole her watch. He was masked when he did it, but she may be able to recognize him.”

“He was a man of medium size,” said Arietta. “As there are so many like him in that respect, and as I failed to take note of his clothing, it may be hard for me to pick him out. I think I would know his voice, though.”

“Well, don't worry, Et; we'll manage to get him. You are going to have that watch back, as sure as you are riding that horse of yours!”

The girl smiled.

That she believed him there was no questioning.

Wild had given her the watch some time before, and she had managed to keep it so far.

True, she did not always carry it with her, but she had taken it this time, since they had started to ride all the way to our hero's ranch in Texas, on the Rio Grande.

They intended to ride south, following the Rocky Mountains until they got to El Paso.

Five miles is a short distance, indeed, for those used to the saddle to cover.

It did not seem more than a few minutes when our

friends came in sight of a little mining camp that was located on the bank of a rather wide creek.

It lay almost straight west from the regular stagecoach trail.

“Well, there is Silver Boom,” said Young Wild West. “I guess it is a new camp, by the looks of it, and a very new one, at that. There are not more than half a dozen shanties in it. The rest of the living places are tents.”

“There is a gin-mill there, all right,” observed the scout, with a grin. “My! but that is a good, big sign ther galoot has put out.”

Though they were a quarter of a mile from it, they could distinguish the word “SALOON,” on the upper part of one of the brand-new shanties.

“Me likee hully uppee, so be,” remarked Hop Wah, and then he made a grimace and rubbed his stomach.

“You are getting sick, I suppose,” said Wild. “Ther heathen galoot always gits sick as soon as he knows there's a chance ter git whisky,” retorted Charlie. “He gits sick at ther sight of a sign, even. But it is wonderful how quick he gits well after he gits a swaller or two of tanglefoot.”

“Well, Hop,” our hero admonished, “I don't want you to go and get boiling drunk as soon as we land in the mining camp. You may be needed to do a little fighting, for if we run across the galoot that stole Arietta's watch there will be a lively time for a little while. Lead will fly as thick as hail, providing those galoots have got any sand in them.”

“Me no gittee dlunk,” Hop hastened to assure him. “Me wantee one lillee dlink of tanglefoot, len me be allee light. Me fightee allee same Melican man.”

The scout grinned.

He knew how much the Chinaman could fight.

“You licked a whole crowd, ter my knowledge,” he remarked, “but yer didn't do it by square fightin'. Yer always had ter set off a blamed old firecracker, or some other thing that would scare ther daylights out of an ordinary man, afore yer done anything that was good.”

“Me savee Misler Charlie's life by shootee off um firecracker once,” the Celestial answered, forgetting that he had a pain, and grinning broadly.

“Well, that's right, Hop. You're always on hand when yer needed ther most. Blamed if I won't stand treat when we git ter that shanty where ther jig-water is sold.”

Charlie had a warm spot in his heart for the Chinaman, even if he did pile it upon him pretty strong sometimes.

Wild said nothing in the way of objection.

He knew that Charlie liked a little strong drink once in a while.

At one time, before he married Anna, he used to go it pretty heavy.

But he had taken the advice of the dashing young dead-shot, and now he only took a drink occasionally.

Neither our hero nor Jim Dart had ever tasted strong drink.

They got along very well without it, too, as may be supposed.

The party rode into the camp in an easy-going way, for mining camps were nothing new to them.

They could see that a number of men were at work in various parts of the ground that had been staked out, and that some machinery was lying about ready to be put in use.

"It must be that they have struck it pretty good here, or they would not have that machinery here," said Wild.

"Well, there is no end of gold and silver in these parts," answered Jim Dart. "The only thing is to find just where it is. Sometimes it is found right on the surface, and then, again, it lies far under the ground. I suppose the day will come when there will be an overplus of both gold and silver."

"I don't know about that, Jim," and the scout shook his head. "I reckon everybody would like ter have plenty of gold an' silver. That's ther stuff they make money out of, yer know."

"Gold is the real thing, Charlie," spoke up his wife. "That is worth the same the world over. Silver is not."

"But I reckon silver would be worth jest what our government said it was, though," the scout insisted. "This here is ther only real country there is. I ain't never been in any other countries but Mexico an' Canada, an' if yer kin tell me what's there fur a free-born galoot like me, I'd like ter know. If they didn't want ter take our silver fur what our government says it's worth they could let it alone! We kin git along a blamed sight better without them than they kin without us."

But the argument was cut short, for they now were right in the heart of Silver Boom.

They were being eyed by a motley crowd of men that had gathered in front of the saloon.

It was the girls that were the attraction, for as yet no females had come to reside at the camp.

Wild counted seven horses, saddled and bridled, standing near the saloon, and he made up his mind that they belonged to the party that had arrived ahead of them.

He looked around and saw an open space near the biggest shanty to be seen, which had a sign across the rather high front, declaring that it was a store.

He gave the word, and they rode over to the spot and dismounted.

The miners gave a cheer for the girls, but were not insulting in any degree.

Just as our friends were thinking of unloading the pack-horses a man came swaggering out of the saloon. He came straight across the street, and our hero could tell by his manner that there was going to be trouble.

CHAPTER III.

WILD DOES SOME FANCY SHOOTING.

The fellow was a rather good-looking man of medium height and build, and he could not have been much older than thirty, by his looks.

But there was an air about him that told that he was up to some mischief.

"Good-morning, strangers," he said, rather mildly. "So you've come to Silver Boom to strike it rich, have you?"

"Yes," answered Young Wild West, thinking it best to let him have his own way about it.

"And you have brought ladies with you, I see?"

"Yes, the girls go around with us sometimes. They like an open air life, and they are not afraid of the dangers we sometimes come across."

The stranger smiled.

Then he took off his hat and bowed to the girls, after which he looked at Wild in silence for the full space of a minute.

"You are quite a likely-looking lot—you, especially, young fellow," he went on to say. "Where do you hail from, if you don't mind telling?"

"Well, I have three places that I call home," our hero answered, calmly. "One is in Weston, in the Black Hills, another is in Nebraska, and the third is in Texas. I am not at either place much, though."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that is about the size of it."

"Well, suppose you let me know who you are? I am a stranger here, myself, and I want to get acquainted with everybody in the camp as soon as I can. It makes it more pleasant, you know."

"My name is Young Wild West."

"Yes? I guess I have heard of you, then," and the fellow arched his brows in surprise. "You are the so-called Champion Deadshot of the West, then?"

"Some folks say I am," Wild answered, not the least bit worried over what he was quite sure was coming."

"Well, are you such a good shot that you are entitled to be called the champion?"

"I am always ready to defend the title."

"In what way?"

"In any way."

"That is pretty broad, isn't it?" and the man took a chew of tobacco and smiled at the girls. "Suppose a fellow was to ask you out to try your luck shooting at him, while he shot at you at the same time—what then?"

"Oh, that would be all right. I am always ready for anything that comes along."

There was so much coolness about the dashing young deadshot that the man showed signs of being more surprised than ever.

But he was a remarkably cool sort of a fellow himself, and he forced a smile.

"I am glad to meet such a boy as you are," he said. "I can't say as I ever saw anyone like you."

"I, too, am glad," answered Wild. "If I am different from the general run of boys I can't help it, I suppose. It is a way I have. Are you going into mining here?"

"Well, not for a while. I am not one of the sort who

was cut out for hard work. I am going to stay around here and speculate a while. I belong over in Cheyenne."

"Is that so? What is your name?"

"Ben Brown is my name."

"Oh, yes! I heard of you while I was in Cheyenne."

The man looked at him keenly, but did not show surprise.

The fact was that Wild had never heard of such a person.

He did not believe he belonged in Cheyenne, either, for during the few days our friends had been in that town they had never heard of him.

For reasons of his own he thought he would make out that he had heard of the man, though he knew that he would not be believed, unless he really was from Cheyenne.

Ben Brown, as he called himself, looked around at the party and turned to go away.

But he suddenly changed his mind and said:

"Young Wild West, I challenge you to shoot against me."

"All right, Mr. Brown, I accept the challenge. Whatever way you want to do it will suit me."

"We will shoot at a mark."

"All right."

"I don't claim to be the champion deadshot, as you do, but I will say that I can shoot pretty well."

"I am glad to hear that. But there is nothing strange about it, after all. There are lots of people who can shoot pretty well. Those who live in this part of the country should know how, for there is no telling just when it will be necessary to shoot to defend one's life, or to shoot from being robbed by road agents."

Wild certainly was of the opinion that the man was one of the gang that had come into Silver Boom in advance of them, and that being the case, it might be that he belonged to Greg Green's band of road agents, if he was not the villain himself.

He looked at Arietta, but she did not act as though she recognized the voice of the man.

There was a doubt then, but Wild meant to put it pretty hot to the fellow.

There was no mistaking but that Brown was trying by degrees to pick a row.

His every manner indicated that.

When he issued the challenge to Wild to shoot against him there was a sneering smile on his face.

While the conversation was going on the two Chinamen had been busy unloading the pack-horses.

They had a system about doing this, so it did not take them long.

"I am sorry I came over to see you so soon," said Ben Brown. "I should have waited until you got settled. Going to make your camp here, I suppose?"

"For a while, providing the owner of the land here does not object," our hero answered. "But that makes no

difference in regard to the shooting. I am ready to defend the title I hold."

"Very well. I will show you one of the shots I can make. I am going to shoot off the end of that Chinaman's queue—the one to the right, I mean. Then you try the other."

"You need not bother about shooting at the Chinaman's queue, Ben Brown. He thinks as much of that queue as you do of your nose."

"He does, eh? Well, I never yet saw the Chinaman I was afraid to shoot at. I am going to pick off about an inch of his queue."

"If you do I'll pick off an inch of your nose!"

That started matters going in the way the man wanted them.

He was in for a row, and now was his chance.

But he was altogether too cool to suit him.

"You'll do what?" he cried.

"You heard what I said, I guess. Are you hard of hearing? If you are I'll say it again."

"I am not hard of hearing, but just say it again, will you? Perhaps I didn't understand you right."

"Well," retorted Wild, "I believe you said you were going to shoot an inch off one of the Chinaman's pig-tails."

"That's just what I said, Young Wild West."

"Well, then, I said if you did that I would shoot an inch off your nose! I guess that is plain enough for you, isn't it?"

"Yes, but you can't mean what you say!"

"Oh, yes, I do; I never say anything I don't mean. Those two Chinamen are in our employ, and it is for us to protect them against abuse from the unprincipled men who would injure them. See here, Mr. Ben Brown! I can see about as far through a mill-stone as the next one, and I knew what your game was the minute you came out of that saloon. You came over here for the purpose of picking a row with us. Now if you want a row just sail in!"

Wild had stood it about as long as he could, and he now got out in his true style of doing business.

Brown looked at him coolly for a few seconds, and then he laid his hand on his revolver.

As quick as a flash Wild had his out and on a level with the man's breast.

"You just point that revolver straight in the air, and see to it that you stand perfectly still!" he said, commandingly. "I mean what I say, Brown!"

"Wha-a-a-at!" stammered the villain—for villain he was, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

"Do as I say!"

There was a peculiar ring in the boy's voice as he said this, and the face of Brown turned a shade paler.

There was a crowd of probably two dozen in front of the saloon, and just six of them started to come over.

"Charlie," said Wild, not taking his eyes from his

man, "if anybody starts to interfere in this game just put a button-hole in him!"

"Yer kin jest bet your life I will!" exclaimed the scout, who was itching to get in a row just then.

The six men did not come all the way across the street when they heard this.

The scout had a revolver in either hand, and Jim now pulled one of his.

They both looked as though they meant business.

"Hooray!" yelled a man standing in the doorway of the saloon. "I reckon them galoots can't be scared very easy. It's Young Wild West and his pards! Boys, give 'em a cheer!"

The "boys" responded nobly, and their cheers echoed among the surrounding hills.

This demonstration made our friends feel good.

There is nothing like finding friends in a strange place.

But Young Wild West did not want the miners of Silver Boom to help him take care of the seven villains.

With the help of his partners he was perfectly able to do it.

There was a smile on his face as he saw Ben Brown slowly raise his revolver over his head.

"Is your shooter cocked?" he asked.

"No," was the retort.

"Cock it, but keep it pointed straight in the air. If you don't something might happen to you."

"What are you going to do, Young Wild West?" came from the lips of the man in an anxious tone of voice.

"I am going to show you how well I can shoot. I have won the title of Champion Deadshot, and I want to show you that I have a right to the title."

"But——"

"Never mind, now. You do just as I tell you."

The revolver was cocked and held straight in the air.

Then Wild stepped around until he got just the position he wanted.

Up went his six-shooter until it was on a line with the one Ben Brown held in his hand.

There was a deathly silence for the space of two or three seconds, and then——

Cra-ack!

Two reports, blended into one, rang out.

Brown knew what had happened as soon as anyone else did.

Young Wild West had hit the trigger of his revolver with his bullet, and caused it to go off almost at the same instant the shot was fired.

But one of the six men in the middle of the sandy road was hopping about on one foot now.

The bullet from our hero's shooter had glanced from the trigger of Brown's weapon and hit his boot-top, just grazing the skin on the calf of his leg.

Wild laughed at his antics, for he knew he could not be hurt much.

If the bullet had lodged in his body anywhere he would have dropped to the ground.

"I didn't mean to hit anybody," he said, calmly. "I got in what I thought was the proper position to not do it. I had to be mighty careful, or I would have hit your fingers, Brown. You never saw a shot like that, did you?"

"No," was the reply.

He was still holding the revolver as he had been told to do.

Crack!

Wild fired again.

This time his bullet hit the shooter near the end of the barrel, and it fell from the man's hand.

"Why didn't you hold on to it?" the boy asked, with a smile.

"It went out of my hand before I knew it," was the reply.

"Oh; all right. Now, let's see what you can do in the line of shooting. Just order me to hold my shooter up and cock it, will you?"

"Will you do it?"

"No! It is for you to make me do it, the same as I did to you. That is part of the game, you know."

Ben Brown turned and walked to the saloon, without stopping to pick his revolver from the ground.

He had been crushed—utterly crushed, and that was all there was to it.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GAMBLERS OF SILVER BOOM.

Ben Brown never once looked behind him as he went into the shanty saloon.

He had had quite enough of Young Wild West for the present.

His men slowly followed him, though some of them acted as though they were not satisfied with the way things had turned out.

The keeper of the saloon had a broad grin on his face as he waited for Brown's order.

"Whisky," said the man who had been called by our hero, and brought to the round turn.

The rest took the same.

"Pretty bad sort of a youngster ter tackle, I reckon," observed the saloon man.

"Well, I'll have to admit that he downed me fair and square," was the reply. "I'm a pretty good one with a shooter, too. He was a little too quick for me; but that was because I under-rated him, I suppose. But it is all right. I don't bear him any grudge. Fair is fair with me, every time."

This remark set the villain right before his hearers.

Nearly every man of the miners were in sympathy with Young Wild West and his friends, and they would have fought for them if it was necessary.

So when they heard Brown say it was all right, and that

he had no hard feelings against the boy, they took it for granted that he meant it.

He had treated them all when he came to the camp half an hour before our friends arrived, and that made them think he was a pretty good sort of a fellow.

Not that they were dependent upon anyone for their drinks, for the miners of Silver Boom were all pretty flush just about then.

Things were going with a hurrah, and money was plentiful.

"This is a pretty good sort of a camp, I think," remarked Brown, as he settled the bill. "Is there much doing around here?"

He looked over at the two card-tables that were in the room as he spoke.

"Oh, there's a little game goin' on ther most of ther time, I reckon," was the reply. "Ever do much at draw poker?"

"It's the greatest game there is, I think. I like it."

One of the miners pricked up his ears at this.

He went by the name of Big Zack, and he had the reputation among the miners of Silver Boom of being the boss card-sharp.

The eyes of the saloonkeeper turned to him, and those of Ben Brown followed the gaze.

Now, it so happened that there were two or three there who believed that Big Zack's winnings was caused by an extraordinary streak of luck.

Two of them were just itching to get in a game with him, thus hoping to get back from him what they had lost the night before.

"Wanter play?" the big gambler asked, looking at the two and nodding.

"Yes," was the reply from both.

"And I will play, too," spoke up Brown. "That is, if you have no objections."

"Sartin' we ain't got no objections. Ain't there another of yer what wants ter play? A five-handed game is all right, I reckon."

There was no doubt, by their actions, that all the six who had come with Brown to the camp were willing to play, but a sharp glance at them from their leader made them keep still.

So the four selected one of the tables and sat down.

"We ain't got no chips here, so you'll have ter play with real money," explained the keeper of the saloon. "Every jack-pot means a round of drinks ter be paid fur by ther winner."

"That is fair enough," answered Brown, just as though he was not thoroughly acquainted with the way poker was played in the saloons of the mining camps. "Do you count straights?"

The last was said to Big Zack.

"No," was the reply. "Four aces is ther winnin' hand ther way we play here."

"All right. There is nothing like knowing just what sort of a game you are going to play before you begin."

"We'll play ther regular game," said one of the miners who had dropped in. "If a feller kin win by bluffin', let him do it. No limit, an' when a man's broke he ain't allowed ter borrer from anyone in ther game."

"All right," nodded Brown.

"That's ther only real way ter play draw poker," Big Zack added, with a grin on his homely visage.

They cut for deal, and the miner sitting to the left of Big Zack won.

Then Brown, who, by the way, was a professional card-sharp, up to all the cheating that was known in the great Western gambling game, put up his ante.

It was only a dollar, and the result was that the other three looked at each other and grinned.

But nothing was said, and as the man next to Brown placed a ten-dollar bill on the board and remarked that it would cost eleven dollars to draw cards, he seemed surprised.

"You gentlemen play a pretty stiff game," he observed, innocently.

"This ain't very stiff," answered Big Zack. "You oughter see us last night. There was over two thousand dollars on ther table in one jack-pot."

"Is that so? I don't know as I could stay in a game of that kind very long. I haven't over a thousand dollars with me."

The miner card-sharp smiled faintly.

It was evident that he had made up his mind at that very moment to get hold of that thousand dollars as quickly as he could.

But he did not know his man, though he should have been suspicious of the stranger, for he was just the cut of the professional gambler to be found throughout the West.

The cards were dealt, and no one said anything for a minute.

"Jack-pot," said the big man.

"I've got a pair, but I'm agreeable," answered Brown. The other nodded, so the cards were thrown down.

It was the gambler's deal now, and picking up the cards, he shuffled them carefully, as though he was afraid he was not doing it well.

But in reality he was fixing them to suit him.

He laid them down, and the man at his right cut them. There was just forty-four dollars on the board now, which was a small sum for that part of the country.

Brown carefully dealt the cards around.

One miner looked at his hand and found that he had a pair of jacks.

That was sufficient to open the pot, so he did so, laying down a fifty-dollar bill.

The miner next to him had three tens, so he went right along.

Big Zack had a pair of aces, so he simply jumped at the chance to go in.

Brown looked his hand over after the fashion of a novice.

He remained in a study for a few seconds and then observed:

"Well, I may as well go in, too. There is no telling but I might draw something worth while."

The fact was that the villain knew just what his opponents had, for he was very slick with the cards, and he had dealt them all hands that would open a jack-pot.

He knew just how many cards each would draw, too, though to look at him just then it would seem that he was studying solely his own hand.

He only had a pair of trays.

"Three cards," said the man on his left, as he picked up the deck to give them the number they called for.

He gave the man the three cards, and as one of them was a jack, he had three, or enough to make him think he had a good chance.

The other man took two, and got enough to make him a full hand.

Big Zack received an ace and a pair of deuces, making his a full hand, also, and the best hand of the three.

But the cards that Brown drew were two trays and an ace, making him have four trays.

He studied his hand as he looked it over, and though the others watched his face they could not tell whether he had bettered himself much or not.

That was the part of it that made him a success at the game.

Though he could put up the cards and deal what he wanted to the men who played with him, he had a way about him that made him appear innocent.

The man who had opened the jack-pot bet ten dollars.

The other miner raised it ten, and then Big Zack lifted it fifty on the strength of his ace-full.

Brown pondered for a moment, and went him a hundred better.

Both miners promptly dropped out.

They figured it that the stranger could not be bluffing, and they made up their minds to let the pot go.

But Big Zack was a much better player than they were.

He knew he stood a show of winning, providing the cards had been dealt straight, and he thought they had.

An ace-full is not beaten every day.

"A hundred more," he said, looking at Brown and grinning, as though he regarded the whole thing as a joke.

"A hundred more than you," was the reply, and the money was put up.

Big Zack hesitated.

"I'll call yer," he finally said, and he put down the money and placed his elbows on the table, his eyes fixed on the gentlemanly stranger.

"Well, I was lucky enough to draw two more trays—I had two to go in with, you know."

"Thunder! You win all right, an' I've got as putty a full hand as yer are apt ter see in a dog's age!"

Brown coolly raked in the money, and stuffed it in his pockets.

At this juncture who should come in but Cheyenne Charlie and Hop Wah, the Chinaman.

The scout was keeping his promise to buy a drink for the Celestial.

They stepped to the bar, and soon got what they wanted.

Then Hop walked softly to the card table.

Big Zack had swallowed his surprise, and was shuffling the cards to deal for another hand.

"Me likee play pokee," said the Chinaman, looking at the players in his innocent, childish way.

They all looked at him, the big miner holding the cards still in his hand.

"You'd like ter play, hey?" he blurted out. "Have yer got any money?"

"Me gottee lillee money," was the reply. And then Hop showed a good-sized roll with a few hundred-dollar bills in it.

The eyes of Ben Brown sparkled and he looked at the Chinaman in a queer sort of a way for a moment.

"Sit down," he said. "We'll make a five-handed game of it."

The two miners were agreeable, of course, so Hop sat down, the others moving up for him.

Cheyenne Charlie grinned and lighted a cigar.

He was perfectly satisfied that there was no one there who could beat the Celestial at that particular game.

Experience had taught him that.

As has been stated, Hop Wah was one of the most innocent-looking of his race.

No one would have taken him for an expert gambler. But he was, just the same.

Big Zack did not offer to have another cut for deal, but went right on shuffling the cards.

Hop got a seat on his right, so he would be the last to deal when it went around.

One of the miners explained the way they were playing the game and Hop nodded, acting very much as though anything would suit him, which was really the fact.

Ten dollars was the ante this time, and when the cards went around all went in.

The shrewd Hop picked out the man who had called himself Brown as being the one to look out the most for, as he had seen him take in the last pot as he came in the saloon.

If Brown's face could not be studied, Hop's certainly could not.

He was too innocent to play cards, so the two miners thought.

The rest of the men in the place crowded around the table.

Hop played just like the greenest kind of a greenhorn, and lost fully two hundred dollars by the time it came for him to deal.

Then he settled down to win it back, and more with it.

Brown had been the lucky one, he winning three pots out of the five.

The two miners were the victims, so far, but they were game, and meant to win or lose all they had.

As money was plentiful there, they would only have to work a few days to get more.

As Hop started to deal Young Wild West and Jim Dart came in.

Our hero did not seem to be surprised at seeing the Chinaman at the table, and as he said nothing to him Hop went right ahead.

CHAPTER V.

HOP WAH SHOWS A TRICK IN MAGIC.

Young Wild West and Jim Dart had noticed that it was very quiet in the saloon, so they had decided to go over and see what was going on there.

There was not the least danger of the girls being interfered with, and as our hero wanted to find out all he could about the men he suspected of being the road agents, he was anxious to get down to the real business that would result in restoring to Arietta her watch.

Wild bought cigars for himself and Jim, and then walked over and joined the spectators.

Hop dealt out the cards and laid down the pack.

There was an ante of ten dollars and a "blind" of ten more up, which made it cost each man twenty dollars to draw cards.

Hop looked at his hand and smiled in his simple way.

He had dealt himself the four aces of the pack, cold, as they call it in gambling terms.

He had also given Ben Brown two kings, and he had two more ready for him when he drew cards.

What the rest got he did not keep track of.

He only knew that he could deal the two kings to the man he wanted them to go to, and that was all he cared about.

They all came in, for none of them were without a pair, it happened.

That made just a hundred dollars on the board, when Hop had met the ante and "blind."

Brown drew only two cards, which Hop thought rather strange, since he knew he held a pair of kings.

But gamblers sometimes hold a side card, so he did not bother his head about it.

He was going to win the pot, anyhow.

One of the miners made a bet of five dollars, showing that he did not have a very strong hand, or that he was trying to lead the others on.

Hop smiled blandly as he saw the next man raise it to ten.

Then he looked serious when Brown made it a hundred.

Big Zack uttered an exclamation of disgust and threw down his hand.

He only had two small pair, and he was not going to

risk such a hand with Brown in the game, for he had decided that he was a whole team at draw poker.

Hop met the raise, and lifted it another hundred.

The two miners promptly dropped out.

"So it is only the Heathen Chinee I have to buck me, eh?" remarked Brown. "Well, John, I am going to give you a run for your money."

"Me no namee John; me namee Hop Wah," said Hop, a little testily.

"All right, Hop Wah. Well, here goes! How does that strike you?"

He put down three hundred dollars, making it a raise of two hundred.

"Me no undelstand um dlaw pokee muchee, but me t'inkee you bluffee," observed Hop, smilingly. "Me havee laisee 'nother hundled."

And he did raise it, too.

"It may be that you are smarter than you look to be, and that you are bluffing, instead of me," said Brown. "How does this hit you? Do you still think I am bluffing?"

He put out six hundred dollars in big bills.

"You laisee five hundred dollee!" exclaimed Hop, as though that was too much for him.

"That is just the size of it, John Chinaman."

"Me no John Chinaman; me Hop Wah. Me allee samee Melican man; me workee for Young Wild West, and me play dlaw pokee allee samee Melican man."

"Well, let it go at that, then," and the gambler cast a glance of uneasiness at our hero, who stood opposite him, his arms folded across his broad chest.

Hop smiled, sweetly this time, and pulled out all the money he had with him.

There was more than a thousand dollars in the pile, and as he began counting it out Ben Brown turned pale, while a murmur of surprise went up from the lookers-on.

"Hold on!" exclaimed the gambler. "Do yer want ter call me?"

"You calle me," was the retort, as Hop put down a thousand dollars. "Me winnee, or me losee allee me got."

Brown hesitated.

The fact was that he only had just about enough to make the call.

He was plainly worried, and he looked his hand over, as though he was trying to make the four kings he had increase in value.

There was only one possible hand to beat him in that kind of a game, and it was possible that the Chinaman might hold it.

He decided to call him, so putting down the required amount he nerved himself for what was to come, be it good or bad, and said:

"What have you got?"

"Me gottee four lilee aces!" was the calm rejoinder, and Hop laid them down, so everybody could see them, and raked in the pile of money.

It is more than likely that if Young Wild West and

his partners had not been there trouble would have ensued, for the gambler was nearly broke.

But he swallowed his defeat without a word and got up from the table.

"I am done for the present," he said, slowly. "But I will meet you again, John Chinaman."

"Misler Hop Wah my name," corrected the Celestial.

Then he looked around and picked up the cards.

"I reckon yer got bit putty hard that time," observed Big Zack, grinning at Brown, as he arose from the table. "I ain't no fool, an' I don't mind tellin' yer that I'm a putty good one with a deck of cards. I soon found that you was better'n me, though; an' now I'm dead sartin that ther heathen kin double-discount you. I've got enough cash left ter treat, so everybody come an' have somethin'!"

That ended the card game.

Young Wild West knew quite well that Hop must have cheated the gambler, but as he knew Brown had been up to the same game himself he decided to let it go.

Whenever he found the Celestial winning from an innocent man he always made him give back his winnings, for he knew Hop could not play a square game.

Ben Brown took a drink with the big miner, and then turned and talked in low tones with his six followers for a minute or two.

The result was that they all went out, and taking their horses by their heads, led them over to a vacant spot near the creek.

They went in camp here, which showed that they meant to stay in the mining camp a while longer.

Turning to Big Zack, our hero said:

I guess those fellows came here to make their living by gambling. I can tell pretty well what a man is, and Brown looks to be a professional gambler. I advise you to quit playing with them."

"I reckon that's putty good advice, Young Wild West," was the reply. "I kin stand what I lost this mornin', all right. I'm mighty glad that ther Chinee took ther boodle ther galoot had, though. I couldn't have got it, I know, an' if he hadn't dropped inter ther game jest as he did I reckon me an' ther other two galoots would have been cleaned out. I did call myself ther king-pin at poker in this here camp, but I won't any more. Ther Chinee kin play all around me."

"An' so kin ther other chap, Zack," spoke up one of the victims.

"Yes, that's right. But you ain't deuce-high at ther game."

"I know it, but I'll play you some time when I git better acquainted with ther cards. We've all got ter learn, yer know."

"And pay well for learning," added Jim Dart.

Hop was looked upon with considerable favor since he had shown what he could do with the cards.

He was just in the humor to give a little performance in the way of magic.

"Me show Melican mans nicee lilleeclick," he said, as

he put down a glass, after swallowing a stiff horn of tanglefoot, as he always called the liquor sold in mining camps.

"Go ahead!" exclaimed Big Zack. "If yer kin show us any better trick than what yer jest played on that cardsharp I'll treat ter ther best Havana cigars Bill Jagg has got in his shanty."

"Allee light."

Hop got ready for business.

The first thing he did was to pull out a big yellow silk handkerchief.

It was one he always carried, and he never used it for anything but in the performance of his magic.

Walking over to the table, he picked up the cards they had been playing with, and carefully shuffled them.

"You pickee outtee card," he said to the big miner.

"All right," answered Big Zack. "I reckon I've seen ther trick afore, but I'll do it jest ter please yer, an' them what ain't seen it."

Hop only smiled at this.

The card the man picked out was the jack of clubs.

He let everyone in the room see it but the Chinaman.

"Now you puttee um card in um pack," said Hop.

This the miner did.

Then Hop carefully wrapped the pack in the big handkerchief—or he seemed to—and this done he placed it on the table.

"Now me likee havee hat lilleec while," the Celestial said, smiling at Big Zack.

"All right; here she is," and off came the big brown sombrero.

"Looke in, so um see no cards in um."

"Oh, there ain't no cards in my hat. I don't play poker that way."

He held it up, so everybody could see that it was as he declared, and then Hop took the hat.

He placed it over the handkerchief and pack of cards, talking a lot of nonsense meanwhile, and then stood up and looked at the ceiling for a moment in silence.

"Takee um hat," he said, suddenly.

The miner obeyed.

"Puttee on um headee," went on the Celestial, hurriedly.

This was done, too.

Then those looking on noticed that there was a card sticking in the band of the hat.

It was the jack of clubs!

"How in thunder did that git there?" Big Zack cried, when his attention had been called to it.

"Velly stlange," answered Hop, smiling blandly.

"I should say it was strange. Why, I didn't see yer put it there."

Hop shook his head.

"Me no puttee card in um pack," he declared.

Then he picked up the handkerchief and shook it out before the eyes of all hands.

The pack of cards had vanished.

"Thunder!" ejaculated the big miner.

Hop calmly took the card from his hat.

Then he stepped back and told him to take off his coat.

"What do yer want me ter do that fur?" Zack asked.

"Me wantee findee um cards."

"Yer don't think I've got 'em under my coat, do yer?"

Off came the coat as quickly as he could get it from him, and down upon the floor fell the pack of cards.

Cries of surprise, followed by a burst of laughter, went up from the miners.

It was all very mystifying to them, but the expression on the face of Big Zack as he looked at the cards on the floor was too much for them, and they simply gave way to merriment.

Hop calmly gathered up the cards.

Then he sorted them over and took the jack of clubs from them.

Walking over to a corner of the room, he stuck the card on a protruding nail.

"Misler Wild," said he, looking at our hero, "you shootee um heads off um jackee."

"Anything to help you along with your magic, Hop," was the reply.

Then Wild drew his revolver and two shots went from it.

Both heads on the card had bullets through them.

The Chinaman calmly took the card from the nail, and after showing it to all hands, put it back in the pack.

He shuffled the cards, and then asked Big Zack to find the card that had the bullet holes through it.

The miner leafed over the pack, but it was not there.

The jack of clubs was there, however, but it showed no signs of having been shot at.

This only added more mystery to what the Celestial had shown them.

"Lat velly nicee tick," he said, with a childish grin.

Then they all wanted to treat him, but Wild needed him to put the camp in shape, so he told them that Hop would show them something more in the line of magic later on.

As our friends went out they saw that a wagon train was just coming into the camp.

The wagons were loaded with lumber, provisions, general supplies, and barrels of liquor.

"Ther boomers has come!" shouted Big Zack, waving his hat. "Now ter see Silver Boom take a jump!"

"It does look like business," said Wild. "Hello! Ben Brown has stopped them. I wonder what he is up to?"

He watched long enough to see the villain buy a wagon-load of lumber and pay for it with money he got from his companions.

"I guess he means to settle here all right," he said to his partners.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GAMBLERS MAKE A ROUSING GOOD START.

"Boys," said Ben Brown, when they came to a halt on the bank of the creek, "I guess we'll hang up here for

a while. We must locate here in Silver Boom, you know, if we expect to carry on our business in the proper way. Here we will be known as the gamblers, and somewhere else——"

"Ther road agents," added one of the men, quickly.

"That's right, Sparrow; if we can't clean up a thousand dollars a day, on an average, while we stay here I'll just miss my calculations, that's all."

"There ain't enough galoots here ter do much at gamblin', though," another of the villains said. "I reckon we'll do more on ther trail than we will with ther cards in this camp."

"Don't worry about that. There will be lots of people here in less than a week. Why, there is a crowd of boomers on the way here now. I did think of holding them up a few miles back from here, but on second thought I concluded to let them get here. There is lots of money in circulation here, and the more men there are here the more there will be of it. We will get our share, for there are always plenty of galoots to play draw poker with—they all seem anxious to lose their money, too. Just leave it to me, boys; I'll fix things so we will get all that is coming to us."

The fact was that the band of seven outlaws had heard about the boom at the new mining camp, and they had come there for the express purpose of swindling the miners out of the money, and to do a business on the trail between times.

They had not been there long when they saw a wagon train approaching.

"The boomers are coming now, boys!" exclaimed Brown, pointing to the new arrivals.

"As sure's you're born, they are!" echoed the man called Sparrow, who, by the way, appeared to be a sort of lieutenant of the gang.

"Jove! They've got lumber and boards there! I wonder if we can't buy enough to put up a shanty? We could get the boards we wanted of them if they'll sell, and there is plenty of trees to be cut down to make the frame of the shanty. Boys, I am going to try them. I am about broke myself, but I guess there is money enough in the crowd to buy what we need. We'll start a gambling-house of our own here."

The six men were pleased at this proposition.

"Go ahead an' make a bargain, cap," said one.

As the wagon-train came up Brown hailed the driver of a big wagon that was loaded with rough boards.

"Want to sell that load?" he asked.

"Whoa!" called out the driver.

"I reckon I kin sell if I get enough money," was the reply. "I brought along about twice as much lumber as I needed, jest fur ther purpose of findin' customers. There is them in ther crowd here what wants ther stuff, but I'm out ter make money. You pay more than they will an' you kin have it."

"I'll give you a thousand dollars for two loads of the

stuff, providing you furnish the nails to put it up in a shanty."

"Done!" cried the driver, who happened to be the owner himself.

It did not take long for Brown to get the money from his followers.

It was paid over, and then men began to unload the lumber right where he told them to.

In less than an hour later the whole seven of them were at work putting up a shanty.

The boomers went into camp in various parts of the mining place, and as there were about thirty men among them, they made a big addition to Silver Boom.

Some of them had their wives and children with them, and they had all come there for the purpose of making money.

Ben Brown knew that the quicker he got his shanty erected the better it would be for him, so he sought the services of half a dozen men, agreeing to pay them at the rate of ten dollars a day.

They were willing to work, for the most of them had very little cash, and as foodstuffs were high, they needed a little start.

The result was that the shanty began going up in a hurry.

While it was being erected Brown went around among his men and collected enough to buy a barrel of whisky.

"We want to open up in good style, boys," he said. "I will have a faro table and a roulette outfit over from Cheyenne inside of a week, and you can just bet we will make things hum in this new camp!"

It was a good-sized shanty that the gamblers were putting up.

They meant to make it pay for itself in a very few days, if possible, so they thought they might as well have the best that could be built with the material that was at hand.

By the time darkness came around the shanty was all framed, and the men were putting the roof and sides on.

Ben Brown thought he could open up business, so he did so.

He had no difficulty in buying three oil-lamps of the boomers, for the most of them were willing to sell anything they had, providing they got the price they asked for it.

The next thing he wanted was a long strip of canvas that would do for a sign, and some paint.

The gambler got both in short order.

The canvas was stretched out as soon as he had eaten his supper, and while one of the villains held the lamp Brown quickly painted on the canvas the legend:

"THE SQUARE DEAL HOUSE.

"B. Brown, Prop."

"I reckon that looks fine, cap," said Sparrow, admiringly. "You sartinly kin make letters quick with a brush, an' yer make 'em jest in ther right style, too."

"Oh, that is easy enough, Sparrow," was the retort. "I always was pretty good at lettering and drawing. It came natural to me when I was attending school in the little Ohio Schoolhouse years ago."

"Was you born in Ohio, cap?" asked the villain's lieutenant.

"Yes; about ten miles outside of Toledo."

"Well, I was born in that State, too; but it was down near ther Ohio river. My father was a mighty rich man, but when ther war come he was cleaned out. He jined ther Confederate army after that, an' was shot. My mother didn't live long after that, an' then ther first thing I knowed I found myself in ther poor-house. I was only seven years old, but I was old enough ter know that ther poor-house wasn't no place fur me, so one night, after I'd been there about a year, I sneaked away an' got on a freight train that was bound fur ther West. I stole grub from a grocery store ter take along with me, which was ther first time I ever took anything that didn't belong ter me."

"It wasn't the last, though, was it, Sparrow?" queried the captain, with a chuckle.

"I reckon not, cap. But, as I was a-sayin', I come as fur as El Paso, Texas, on that freight-train—or I jest stuck ter one car, 'cause ther train hands found me afore I'd gone fur, an' they took pity on me, an' allowed that I could go as fur as ther blamed old freight was goin', after they'd heard my story. From El Paso I drifted ter a ranch, an' it was there I growed up. I got ter be very bad, cap. I was one of ther worst in them parts, they said, so I had ter light out an' I come ter Cheyenne. It was there I met you, an' since that time we've been gittin' along mighty good together. There's worse fellers than I are fur a chum, I reckon, cap."

"You are right, Sparrow. You and I will always be fast friends. Your story reminds me of my own life, only that I did not strike out for the Far West as young as you did. I held a responsible position five years ago, but I was not satisfied with the money I made at it; I had to gamble. I lost more than I had of my own, and soon I had squandered a few thousands that belonged to my employers. It was time for me to quit and light out, so I did. I then decided to be a first-class gambler, and I stuck to it until I got so I could handle the cards with the best of them. That Chinaman got the best of me to-day, but he is the first one who has been able to do that trick in over a year. I want to stack up against him again, just to see if I can learn anything from him. I don't bear the fellow any grudge because he took my money from me. He got it without me being able to catch him doing anything crooked, and you know he must be a mighty good one to be able to do that."

"I know that, cap. I'm a putty good one myself, an' I would have laughed at ther chance ter git a whack at ther heathen. But what would he have done ter me?"

"Well, he couldn't do any more than break you, and that is what he did to me."

The two laughed, and then walked out to put the sign up on the high false front that had been built up to make the building look as though a two-story affair from the street, or road, as it might better be called.

It was one of the quickest built shanties of its size that had gone up in Silver Boom, for though it was not finished, business could be done in it.

The floor had been laid, but the roof and sides were not completed.

Brown could only get hold of half a dozen tumblers, and these he put on the two boards that were set upon barrels to form a bar.

One of the oil lamps was hung outside, and the other two, which were bracket lamps, were put up inside.

There was an enormous profit in whisky at fifty cents a drink, and Brown figured that it was a good game he had started.

While the business was going at its full height the man he had bought the lumber of came in, followed by a couple of his friends.

"You're a hustler," he said to Brown. "Give us a little tanglefoot; I reckon I ought ter patronize your shanty, since I sold yer ther stuff ter build it."

"You will drink at my expense," replied the gambler. "I appreciate what you did for me, though I know you got well paid for the lumber. I am going to make things hum here."

He gave the man, who said his name was Collins, a rousing good drink, and his friends, as well.

Then he insisted on giving them another.

"I reckon I'll pay fur ther next one," said Collins.

"No, you won't," was the reply.

So they had another at the expense of the owner of the new place.

The result was that the three boomers got pretty well under the influence of liquor.

There was nothing strange about this, since they had visited the other saloon two or three times during the day.

Sparrow and two others, who were handy with tools, had been busy putting up some rough tables, nailing them to the side of the shanty.

These were to be used as temporary card tables.

They were just about done now—three of them—and the gamblers started to playing.

They were bound to draw others in the games, and before long each of the tables had from four to six men sitting around it.

Two of the gamblers were at each, having it arranged between themselves to fleece the others out of their money.

When two expert card-players play "partners" in a poker game the rest, if they are trying to play square, had better quit.

Ben Brown had all he could do to take care of the bar that night.

He could not get the chance to play cards at all.

The three boomers, who had been treated in such a lib-

eral way by him, soon lost more than they could afford to at the cards.

But Collins was what they call "game," and he stuck at it until he lost the entire amount of money that Brown had paid him for the lumber.

Then he managed to stagger to his camp to go to sleep.

In the morning he would realize what a fool he had been.

It must have been three o'clock in the morning before the last man left the new saloon.

Already some of the gamblers were snoring away in one end of the shanty.

Sparrow was very jubilant.

He had remained quite sober, and his winnings were enough to elate him.

"Put out the lights, Sparrow," said Brown, as they got the last man from the place. "I guess we have done enough for one night. How did you and the boys make out? I have been so busy getting rid of whisky that I haven't had a chance to keep much of a line on what you were doing?"

"Everything's lovely," was the reply, as the villain put out the light outside. "I guess you'll be surprised when we count up."

"Well, I am too tired to do that to-night. We'll wait till morning. This is the hardest day's work I have put in since I was a boy."

Sparrow leaned over and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"There's more boomers due to-morrow," he said. "There is a galoot named Stephens among 'em what's got a big pile of money. He's comin' here ter buy up all ther best claims, if he kin git ther owners ter part with 'em. We want this here Stephens, don't we, cap?"

"That's right," was the reply. "The road agents will have to tackle him, I guess. Greg Green hasn't done any business since he got the nice little gold watch from Young Wild West's sweetheart. You bet we will be on hand for Stephens, Sparrow!"

The two villains then turned in.

They were the last to do so, and they did not appear to think it necessary to keep a watch.

Surely the gamblers had started off well in Silver Boom.

But how they were to wind up was another thing.

CHAPTER VII.

WILD'S THEORY IS PROVEN TO BE CORRECT.

Young Wild West and his friends fixed up their camp to their liking, and remained pretty quiet the rest of the day.

They saw what the gamblers were doing, of course, but they did not go near them to interfere with their work.

Wild was positive that Ben Brown and his men were the road agents that had been spoken of by the villain who had robbed Arietta of her watch, but since she had failed

to recognize any of them as the one who had done it he was simply waiting to get a clew to work on before he went for them.

He wanted to get hold of the man who had sold the lumber to the gamblers, and have a talk with him, for he knew that by having dealings with them, the man would be likely to have some idea of what they were.

But it was not until the next morning that he got a chance to talk to Collins.

He found the man sitting on the bank of the creek when he got up, and by the looks of him, he was very much worried.

"Good-morning," said Wild, cheerily.

Collins looked up.

Then he arose to his feet.

"You're Young Wild West, ain't yer?" he asked.

"That is just who I happen to be, my friend."

"Did yer ever have a good look at a downright fool, Young Wild West?"

"What makes you ask me that question?" Wild answered.

"Because I'm ther identical downright fool."

"How do you make that out?"

"Well, I'll tell yer. See that new shanty over there, what was put up yesterday in sich a hurry?"

"Yes, I see it."

"Well, I sold two wagon-loads of lumber ter them galoots, an' I got a mighty good price fur ther stuff, too. I wasn't satisfied with that, so I went there last night an' got ter drinkin'. That galoot named Brown is a slick article. He wouldn't let me an' my pards pay fur anything, an' ther first thing we knowed we was playin' poker there."

"Ah, I guess I know what is coming."

"I reckon yer do. Well, ter make a long story short, them galoots has got ther lumber, an' ther money they paid fur it, too."

"I am not surprised to hear that," said Wild, who could not help smiling at the man. "You should have known better. Haven't you learned to size up a man yet?"

"I thought I had. That Ben Brown was jest about one of ther nicest galoots I ever met. But it wasn't him what took ther money from me an' my pards; he jest got us good an' drunk, an' then his pals done it. I kin see through it all now. But my! don't my head ache!"

"You shouldn't drink so much whisky. It would be a great deal better for you if you didn't drink any at all."

"I know that. But a man would go plumb off his base if he didn't git a jag aboard once in a while. There's too much sameness about ther minin' camps of ther West."

"Well, I manage very well to get along without drinking any of it. I always find something to keep me awake, too."

"I reckon yer do, Young Wild West. But I feel better, now that I've told someone what a fool I am."

"What a fool you was last night, you mean."

"Well, let it go that way, then. I bought enough lumber ter make some money when I got here, an' I made more'n I expected ter make, but what good did it do me?"

I jest turns around an' hands it back ter ther galoots what give me ther money! If ever a galoot ought ter be kicked it's me!"

"Well, it can't be helped, I suppose," Wild answered, with a smile. "You will have to get in and hustle, that's all. Build your shanty on the claim you stake out, and then get in and work."

"I reckon I'd better go an' git my breakfast, an' then strike out ter find a claim that'll suit me. There's more boomers due here afore noon to-day. One of 'em is a galoot named Stephens, an' he's comin' here ter buy up some of ther good claims, so's he kin git a monopoly on ther minin' business in this here place."

He must have plenty of money if he expects to do that," Wild answered. "Did you tell anyone else that Stephens is coming, and that he has got plenty of money?"

"Yes, I believe I did tell it ter Ben Brown last night, or some of his gang, I don't know which. I'm sartin I told 'em about it, though. I know! It was ther galoot what's got ther name of Sparrer what I told it to. He 'peared ter be mighty glad ter hear that sich a money-man was comin'. They'll be gittin' him ter play poker afore he's been here very long, an' then they'll git his money away from him."

That's so," our hero observed.

But it occurred to Wild just then that perhaps the gamblers would not wait for the boomers to get to the camp before they made a try for the money Stephens was supposed to have.

Collins walked off in a few minutes, and then Wild went back to the camp.

The two Chinamen were busy getting the breakfast ready, and Charlie and Jim were cleaning up their weapons.

The girls were not out of their tent yet, though they could be heard stirring.

"Boys, I guess we'll take a little ride out along the trail by and by," said Wild to his partners.

"Anything up?" asked Jim.

"I think there will be something up," was the reply.

"I hope there is," spoke up the scout. "I'd jest like ter git a good chance at them gamblers, though."

"Well, you may have the chance. I just heard that there are some more boomers due to arrive some time this morning, and that there is a man among them named Stephens, who has a big pile of money with him. The gamblers know this, and if they really are the road agents the chances are that some of them will be riding out to hold up the boomers somewhere along the trail."

"That's so!"

"So we will just keep a watch on the brand-new shanty, and if any of the gamblers mount and leave we will know that it is up to us to follow them. If I can find out that these men are road agents I am going to openly accuse Ben Brown of stealing Arietta's watch; and you can bet that he'll either give it up in a hurry, or that something will happen!"

"Yer kin bet he will, Wild!" exclaimed the scout.

The shanty was less than a hundred yards from where our friends had pitched their camp, so they could easily see what was going on there, though there were two or three between it and them.

All they had to do was to step down near the edge of the creek once in a while, and they could see the horses belonging to the gamblers tied to trees near the creek.

Wing, the cook, soon had the coffee going over the fire, and then he proceeded to broil some venison and fry some bacon in a pan.

Our friends had shot nearly a dozen young sage-hens the day before, and these were all ready to fry in the bacon grease.

Wing knew how to fry them, too.

It was not more than three-quarters of an hour before the Chinaman announced that breakfast was ready.

The girls had been up some time, and had turned to and assisted the cook.

Anna had a great way of making what she called a "pan of biscuits," and she had them ready when they sat down.

She did this with the aid of a covered pan. She placed the pan in the fire and heaped red-hot coals upon it.

In this way the biscuits would cook the same as if they were in an oven.

The only difficulty about it was that the heat might be too strong and burn the biscuits. But she had it down so fine that she seldom made a mistake.

They ate as good a breakfast as could be obtained in a hotel, and they felt all the more pleased over it, because it was cooked right before their eyes.

It was not until after the meal was over that they saw any signs of the gamblers leaving.

Charlie was on the watch, and when he noticed that three of them were getting their horses saddled he called Wild and Jim.

The rest of the men were finishing the work on the shanty, with the assistance of half a dozen men that Brown had hired.

The work would all be done by night, by the way it looked.

"Well, if there are only three of them going I guess we can take charge of them, Charlie," said our hero. "Jim, you will have to stay here and be on hand in case there is any interference with the girls."

"All right," answered Dart, who was always ready to do what the dashing young deadshot said.

Wild and Charlie waited until they saw the three gamblers mount their horses and ride off.

One of them was Brown, and that made it look as though they were going out on the trail to meet the boomers and hold up the man who was supposed to have so much money with him.

They soon saddled their horses, and then riding down along the creek a short distance, they turned and went around the camp and struck the trail.

Of course, they made sure to know which way the three villains had gone first.

"I reckon ther's ther hoof-prints of ther horses they're ridin'," said Charlie, pointing them out on the soft ground. "They're ther only ones what's gone this way this mornin'; that's easy ter tell."

"That's right," nodded our hero.

They rode along at an easy gait, for they did not want to overtake the three villains and spoil their game.

Wild was dead certain that he was right in his opinion that Ben Brown and Gregg Green, the road agent leader, were one and the same person.

Arietta had failed to recognize him as such, but there were plenty of men who could change their voices enough to deceive anyone.

Our hero figured it that the villain must have spoken in a disguised tone of voice when he was talking to Arietta and Hop.

He had seen enough of the villain to know that he was a pretty clever sort of a man.

They rode along at an easy canter until they reached the trail where it branched off to Elkhorn.

Then Wild and Charlie came to a halt.

It was lucky that they did so, for just then they heard the sounds of approaching hoofs.

Our hero looked around quickly, and saw a convenient place to get in, so they would be out of sight.

He could tell by the sounds that there were not more than two or three horsemen approaching, and that meant that it was most likely Ben Brown and his two companions who were coming.

Wild and Charlie had barely dismounted and led their horses out of sight when they found that what our hero thought was exactly right.

Ben Brown and two of his men rode up and came to a halt but a few yards distant.

Our two friends could tell by their actions that they were waiting for someone to come along.

Wild gave a low chuckle.

He felt that the time had nearly come for him to get back Arietta's watch.

It was only a very few minutes when they heard the sounds made by heavy wagons.

"The boomers are comin'!" exclaimed Charlie, in a low whisper.

"Yes," answered Wild. "They are, sure enough. I wonder if those three scoundrels will have the nerve to tackle them?"

"If they do they'll wish they hadn't."

The three gamblers now drew back around a bend in the trail.

The next minute three heavily loaded wagons appeared.

There was a driver to each, while an elderly man rode ahead on the back of a bony mustang.

"That's Stephens, the man with the money, I'll bet!" said Wild.

"Most likely," was the reply.

"But this can't be the whole crowd, can it?"

"There might be more further behind."

Just as the horseman got opposite to where our friends stood behind the bushes three masked men suddenly appeared.

They were the three gamblers.

Cheyenne Charlie raised his rifle.

"Wait!" exclaimed Wild. "We don't want to drop them unless they show that they mean to kill those men."

The scout reluctantly lowered his weapon.

"Hands up! Stand and deliver!" rang out from one of the masked villains.

It was Ben Brown who spoke, but his voice was disguised.

Taken completely by surprise, the drivers of the wagons brought their mule teams to a halt and threw up their hands.

The horseman showed fight, though.

But when he saw the muzzle of a revolver staring him in the face he gave in.

"Now I guess it is about time for us to interfere, Charlie," said our hero.

The next moment dashing Young Wild West and his partner rode out into view.

"Hold up your hands, Gregg Green!" exclaimed Wild, in ringing voice of command.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT SPARROW DID.

When Sparrow, the gambler, arose after the first night in Silver Boom it was just about the time Young Wild West and his friends were eating their breakfast.

The villain walked down to the creek to take a wash, and while there he got a good look at our friends.

He took particular notice of Arietta, and made up his mind that she was about the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

"I just reckon that I'd like ter win that gal fur a wife," he muttered. "I wonder why it couldn't be done, anyhow? Hanged if I don't ask ther captain what he thinks about it!"

He walked back and met Ben Brown as he came out of the shanty.

"Sparrow," said the latter, "I am going to take two of the men and ride out and meet this fellow they call Stephens. I guess there will be a chance to get his pile away from him, and if there is you can bet that we'll get it."

"I bet yer will, too, cap. But say!"

"What about it, Sparrow?"

"You know ther gal yer took ther watch from?"

"Yes."

"I've jest about fell clean in love with her."

"Nonsense! What makes you talk that way? Don't you know that when a man falls in love he loses about all the sense he ever possessed?"

"I can't help that, cap. I've jest gone an' fell in love

with that gal, an' that's all there is ter it! You said you was going ter get square on Young Wild West fur ther way he got ther best of yer yesterday. Now, why can't we steal his gal from him? That would be gittin' square fur fair, I reckon."

"Well, it would, that's so. But where could you take the girl if we did steal her? I guess it would not be such a hard matter to get her, but what could we do with her?"

"I've found a place ter keep her, so that no one will find her, unless I want 'em to, too. It's on ther other side of ther creek. One of ther puttiest hidin' places yer ever seen!"

"Is that so? When did you find it?"

"Yesterday, when I was over there, lookin' fur a tree that would make timber we needed on ther buildin'. I almost fell inter it. Of all ther snug places you ever seen, it's ther best!"

"Well, if Young Wild West should be away from the camp to-night you might try what you can do. I don't care what you do, in fact. I know I am going to have my revenge on Young Wild West before very long. I am just waiting for a good chance. But I am going now. I will leave things in your charge till I come back."

"All right," answered Sparrow.

As soon as Brown and the two men he took with him were gone, Sparrow began to figure on a way to get hold of Arietta.

It was natural that he should keep a watch on the camp of our friends, so when he saw Wild and the scout ride off he decided that it would be a good time to get the girl then.

It never occurred to him that our hero and Charlie were going on the trail of the three who had just left the new shanty.

At any other time Sparrow might have thought that way, but just now his mind was taken up with the pretty girl he wanted to get hold of.

He went down to the creek again, and pulling off his boots, waded across to the other side.

Once there he slipped the boots on, and entered a clump of dense bushes.

Rocks were piled up in fantastic shapes, and the bushes grew from the crevices.

Right at the spot where a tree had been felled the day before a slanting slab of stone rested against the bank.

Sparrow gave a nod of approval when he came to it.

"That hides ther cave all right, I reckon," he muttered. "There ain't a soul what knows about this cave but me. My! but what a good hidin' place it would be fur us all, if we got inter trouble, an' wanted ter hide!"

Peering around to make sure that no one was watching him, he pulled the stone aside.

A circular opening in what appeared to be a crust of rock was disclosed.

It was not dark inside this, either, and when the villain had dropped upon his knees and peered inside the cave, evidently for the purpose of assuring himself that there

was nothing in it that would interfere with him, he gave another nod of satisfaction.

Then he crawled in and stood upright in a cave that was fully twenty feet square, and at least nine feet high in most parts of it.

It was lighted through a zig-zag crack that ran through to the face of the rocky bluff that overlooked the creek.

The cave was remarkably dry and devoid of rubbish, and it was evident that no one had visited it lately, if, in fact, it was known of at all.

"I jest bet if I got that gal here, an' brought her here blindfolded, she'd think she was in some place where she'd never see her friends agin," he muttered. "That would make her give in putty quick an' agree ter be my wife, I reckon. By thunder! if I don't try ter git her here this very mornin'!"

The gambler soon left the cave, and carefully pushing the thin slab over the opening, worked his way through the bushes and went down to the creek.

He was just thinking of pulling off his boots to wade across when he saw something that caused him almost to let out a yell of joy.

Just above, and right near the camp of Young Wild West, he saw the very girl he was so anxious to get hold of fording the creek.

It was Arietta, sure enough, and with her was Anna, while Eloise stood on the bank.

The girls had seen some very pretty flowers growing on the other side, and Arietta declared that she would go and get some of them.

Eloise, being a bit more timid, decided not to try and cross the creek by stepping from stone to stone.

Jim Dart sat near the tents, smoking and watching the girls.

His rifle lay near him, so he was not the least bit afraid that they would run into any danger.

Sparrow took in the whole scene, and when he found that the two girls were really coming across he made up his mind to try and capture Arietta right then.

He set out for the point they were heading for, moving cautiously along, and being careful to keep the rocks and bushes between him and the view of our friends.

Sparrow took off his coat, and then untied a rope from about his waist that he was wearing in lieu of a belt.

"I reckon these two things will do ther trick," he said, under his breath. "If I kin git ther coat over her head an' wind ther rope around her neck once, an' then her arms, I'll have her so she won't be able ter holler out. I'm goin' ter try it if I have ter push ther other one in ther water!"

He got to the point where Arietta and Anna were trying to reach before they got over the creek.

The stones were slippery, and they had to be careful, lest they fall and get a wetting.

Arietta was the first to get to the bank, and with a merry laugh she hastened to get the flowers.

Then Anna was unfortunate enough to slip, and down she went into about a foot of water!

Arietta heard her scream, and also the splash, and she turned to go to her aid.

Things could not have turned out better for Sparrow if he had had them made to order.

He leaped forward like a shot, and threw the coat over the girl's head.

She uttered a scream, and then she found herself struggling in the grasp of someone.

The coat was drawn tightly over her head, and then her arms were pinioned.

She tried to cry out again, but she was almost smothering, and could not.

Sparrow certainly caught her as neatly as any girl was caught in her life by a scheming villain.

Picking her up, he started for his cave.

He knew his trail would not be discovered, since there was a very hard piece of ground right there, and the tracks would not show.

The distance not being far, he soon got to the cave.

With his heart beating with joy and excitement at what he had succeeded in accomplishing, the villain threw aside the flat stone and crept into the cave.

Arietta was gasping for breath when he dropped her on the ground in a dark corner.

"I'm a desperate man, miss!" he whispered, hoarsely. "If yer move or cry out I'll surely kill yer!"

With that he left her and ran back to close the entrance.

It was easy enough for him to do this, for the slab was not so very heavy.

But let us turn to Jim Dart just now, and see what he was up to.

Jim saw Anna slip and fall into the water, of course, for he was looking right at her at the time.

He ran to the creek and started to cross at once.

While he had been watching Anna he had failed to see what became of Arietta, and he was puzzled when he found she did not come to the rescue of Anna.

Anna got upon her feet before Jim came to her and climbed out on the bank.

"Et!" she called out.

There was no answer.

"Where are you, Arietta?" she again called.

But, as before, there was no answer.

"Something is wrong, I guess," said Jim, as he hurried across. "I think something must have happened to Arietta, as well as you, Anna."

"Why, what could have happened to her, Jim?" asked Anna, in great surprise.

"That I don't know. But you know as well as I do that she would never act this way if she was all right. She would have been right at your side, helping you out of the water almost as soon as you fell if something was not wrong."

Jim looked up and down that side of the creek.

There was only one way that a person could have gone without being seen, and that was to the right.

He ran into the bushes, revolver in hand.

Almost the first thing he saw was a handkerchief lying on the ground.

It was Arietta's.

In the struggle with her captor she had dropped it, and he had not taken notice of it.

"Ah!" exclaimed Jim, "I guess something has happened to her. Some scoundrel must have been waiting for her here. But he won't get very far! I'll shoot the legs from under him if I catch sight of him."

Then, turning to Anna, he bade her go back across the creek.

"I'll find Arietta," he said. "I'll find her pretty quick, too, for she can't be far away."

Jim hurried through the bushes straight for the point where the villainous gambler had taken the girl.

He had not lost much time in getting across the creek, so he got in sight of the cave just in time to see a pair of hands pull a slab over an opening.

Then he knew that Arietta must be there.

Jim lost no time in getting to that slab of stone.

He listened for a moment, and then he heard a man's voice say:

"There is no use in your yellin', anyhow, but if yer do I'll have ter kill yer, as I said afore. Now I'm goin' ter take that coat off your head an' face, so yer kin breathe a little bit better; but don't yer dare ter holler!"

Dart quietly pulled the stone away and looked into the cave.

Dart was not the least worried but that he could take care of the villain.

"Put your hands over your head, or you'll be a dead man in less than ten seconds!"

As Jim said this Sparrow turned as though he was shot.

"Thunder!" he cried. "Ther jig is up."

"I guess it is," and Jim walked up smilingly.

Sparrow put his hands above his head and stood perfectly passive.

Jim walked up to him and quickly disarmed him.

Then he ordered him to free Arietta.

Sparrow was glad to do this.

"You miserable scoundrel!" exclaimed Dart, as he walked over to him. "You did a pretty daring thing just now, but you are going to hang for it!"

Sparrow's face turned pale. Then a desperate gleam shone in his eyes.

Suddenly he dropped to the ground and caught one of Jim's ankles and gave it a pull.

Jim was upset and away went the villain for the opening of the cave.

He was crawling through just as Jim raised his revolver to fire.

But the boy did not shoot. He did not want to kill a man while he was in no position to defend himself.

"Let him go for the present," he said.

CHAPTER IX.

WILD PLANS TO SURPRISE THE GAMBLERS.

The three gamblers were utterly amazed when Young Wild West and Cheyenne Charlie appeared on the scene.

Wild had taken care to cover the leader, leaving the others to Charlie.

When our hero bade Greg Green, alias Ben Brown, to hold up his hands, there was no doubt but that he meant what he said.

The masked villain knew he had no chance, so he obeyed.

His two companions swung their horses around and galloped away around the bend that was a short distance away.

Charlie would have shot at them, but Wild told him not to.

The boy was satisfied with having the leader in his power, for he knew that it was he who had Arietta's watch.

The man who had come so near being the victim of the three scoundrels was delighted at the sudden turn of affairs.

"Young fellow, I'll remember you in my will for this," he said, and then he was foolish enough to ride his horse right into the little gap that was between Wild and the gambler road agent.

The stranger wanted to shake hands with his preserver, but he did not stop to think and ride around to the other side of him.

Of course, at the very first instant that our hero's revolver was shut off him the road agent took advantage.

He plunged the spurs into his horse and let out a yell, and then away the animal leaped like a shot.

In his delight the man had caught Wild by both his arms, and he was declaring how much he appreciated his interference when Greg Green darted away.

Wild did not want the villain to escape, so he darted after him, as soon as he could get clear of Stephens, for that was the man's name.

Charlie unslung his rifle and rode out into the middle of the trail.

He was waiting for the escaping road agent to appear further up the trail.

The scout was going to drop him.

Wild rode on, but though he could hear the sounds of the receding hoofs, he could not see the villain.

It occurred to him just then to let him go.

It was not likely that the three villains would think they had been seen before they donned their masks.

That would be apt to make them feel as though they were safe to go back to their shanty.

As Wild turned back Charlie called out to him:

"What's ther matter, Wild? Ain't yer goin' ter catch ther measly coyote?"

"We'll lay for him some other time, Charlie," was the reply.

"I am awful glad you two fellows happened along just as you did!" exclaimed Stephens, riding up close to Wild and trying to grab him again.

"You told me that before," answered the boy, "and if you had not been so eager about it that fellow would not have got away. You might have got shot yourself, too, for you rode right in front of the muzzle of my shooter. I believe your name is Stephens, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's my name!" the man exclaimed, and then he insisted on shaking Wild's hand again.

"You have lots of money with you, too, haven't you?" "How did you find that out?"

"Well, how do you suppose the road agents found it out? You must have been letting the general public know your business while you were in Cheyenne, Mr. Stephens."

"I must have made a fool of myself, I guess," Stephens admitted.

"Well, it is lucky that someone else didn't interfere with you before you got this far. You didn't leave Cheyenne with these three teams and their drivers, did you?"

"No; there's a whole crowd coming a mile or so behind us. We've been hustling' a bit this morning. We started ahead of the rest. This is the outfit I am taking to the new mining camp. I've got about everything a man can want on these wagons. I expect to locate at Silver Boom. I sent a friend over last week to look it over for me, so I know just about what I am going to do when I get there."

"Well, if us two fellows had not come along just as we did the chances are that your calculations would have been upset entirely. That fellow was Greg Green, the road agent. I wanted him pretty bad, because he took a fine watch from a young lady friend of mine yesterday, and I promised her I would get it back for her."

Stephens was now quite cool and sensible.

He realized that he had made a mistake in riding between Wild and the man he had covered, and he now hastened to apologize for it.

"That is all right," answered our hero, with a smile. "I understand human nature pretty well. You could not help it, I know. We'll let it go at that. I'll catch Greg Green all right, and I'll get the watch, too."

"I glory in your grit, young man! But who are you, anyway? I should like to know your name."

"Young Wild West is my name."

The three drivers had all heard of the dashing young deadshot, and they gave a simultaneous start.

"He's ther champeen deadshot, Mr. Stephens," said one. "It ain't no wonder that he made ther galoots hold up their hands! He could have dropped ther whole three of 'em afore they could have pulled on him."

"Young Wild West, eh?" mused the wealthy speculator. "Seems to me I have read something about a young fellow by that name."

"That's quite likely," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie.

"There's been lots printed about Young Wild West in the papers."

"You're one of his pard, I reckon?" said the driver, who had just spoken.

"Yes, I'm ther galoot they call Cheyenne Charlie."

"An' where's ther other pard—Jim Dart, I mean?"

"He's over in Silver Boom."

"Good! That's where we want ter git as soon as possible, I reckon. Are yer ready, Mr. Stephens?"

"Yes," was the reply. "If Young Wild West thinks it is advisable to go on I am ready."

"Oh, there is no danger of you being bothered now," answered Wild, quickly. "Come on! We'll ride right along with you."

The teams were then started, and they headed for Silver Boom.

Wild was satisfied that the three villains would show up at the mining camp before long, and that they would not attempt to bother the rest of the boomers that were coming on behind.

He rode along with Charlie and Stephens ahead of the wagons, and in due time the five miles were covered, and they reached the mining camp.

Wild rode right up to the camp where he had left Jim and the girls.

When he got there he was treated to a surprise.

Jim and Arietta were there, having come back from the other side of the creek right after Sparrow made his escape.

Our hero was astounded when he heard of what had taken place.

"The scoundrel!" he exclaimed. "To think he would dare to do such a thing right in the open daylight!"

But he did not turn and hasten to the new shanty to punish the villainous gambler.

Wild had decided on a different plan of action.

He did not intend to go there until Ben Brown, alias Greg Green, got back.

That the villain would come back he felt certain.

Charlie was eager to go over to the shanty and have it out with Arietta's abductor.

But he listened to Wild's advice and soon cooled down.

"I was going to wait for him to show up, and then either capture or drop him, but I knew it was not likely that you would want to do anything like that just yet, Wild," said Jim.

"That's right," was the reply. "I am going to let them think that we don't want to interfere with them—or afraid to interfere, if they will go as far as that. Then we'll catch them nicely. The first thing I want to do is to get possession of Arietta's watch."

He then told them what had happened out on the trail, introducing Stephens before he began.

"Et," said he, when he had concluded, "Ben Brown is the man who called himself Greg Green. I know it for a fact, and so does Charlie. He has a way of changing his voice that is really wonderful. He does not know that we

are aware that he is the road agent, so that makes it quite certain that he will come back to his shanty before very long."

"What do you propose to do then?" asked Arietta.

"I am going to take you over there, and then I will challenge Brown to a game of draw poker. I will tell him that you are to be the referee, and that you are going to shoot him if you catch him cheating. Charlie and Jim will go, too; and Mr. Stephens, if he desires."

"I'd like to be one of the party, that's certain," replied the speculator. "If you don't mind, I'll camp right here alongside of you."

"There is plenty of room; go ahead."

That was all our hero said about his plans just then.

But his friends knew it would be no use in questioning him further. They knew him too well for that.

As soon as he got settled in camp Stephens took a walk around and got prices on several claims he wanted to buy.

It had leaked out that there was a buyer with plenty of money, so those who were inclined to sell out put big prices on their claims.

Stephens bought three claims that adjoined one another, for all that.

He told Wild that he would buy more, and buy them right before the week was over.

"There is millions in this spot," he declared. "I am going to make a fortune in less than a month."

"I hope you do," was all our hero said.

The day wore on, and though they kept a good watch they saw nothing of the three villains who had been out on the trail, or of Sparrow.

But our hero was confident that they would turn up, so he simply waited.

The rest of the second crowd of boomers had arrived about an hour after Stephens came in.

With them was a young man, who was unquestionably a tenderfoot.

He had joined the party at Cheyenne, and he was out for riches.

His name was John Bader, and he was a nice-looking and well-built young man.

His style of dress made him look out of place in the rough mining camp, but he did not seem to mind it, and he took the jokes that were given out at his expense good-naturedly.

It was rather late in the afternoon when John Bader paid a visit to the gambling-house for the first time.

It was about this time that Wild sent Hop Wah over.

Word had reached his ears that Ben Brown was now in his place of business.

Our hero thought it a good idea to let Hop get in a game with the villain, and then he would drop in with Arietta and the rest.

Hop was of course delighted to have the chance to get among the gamblers.

He had already cleaned out Ben Brown of one lot of

money, and he was perfectly confident that he could do it again.

When he walked into the new shanty there was quite a crowd gathered there, for the miners were quitting work, and some of them stopped in to get drinks on their way to their shanties.

Two of the gamblers were tending bar, and Ben Brown was talking earnestly to the tenderfoot.

The fact was that John Bader was inclined to go into all sorts of gambling games.

Like a great many young men, he had an idea that he knew all about cards.

Brown had got enough out of him to know that he had quite a little roll with him, so he thought he would relieve him of it.

He looked around and saw Hop come in, smiling as though he was simply coming into a meeting place of friends.

Brown decided to fleece the Chinaman, as well as the tenderfoot.

He quickly cast a glance at Sparrow, who was now there, too.

Sparrow shook his head.

"S'pose Young Wild West or his pards should come in?" he came up and whispered.

"Pshaw! That fellow did not recognize you when he got the girl away from you. If he had he would have been here red-hot looking for you," retorted Brown. "Come on! If anybody accuses you of bothering with a girl, just say that you can prove that you were sleeping at the time. You can easily prove that, you know."

"Yes, I know," was the reply. "But s'pose they won't believe the proof?"

"Well, I reckon ther miners of Silver Boom will give you a square deal. Why shouldn't they, when the evidence is all in your favor. It might be that there is some galoot hanging around that looks something like you."

Sparrow decided that it would be all right to risk it, so he walked over and sat down at a table.

"I invited this man to join us in a little game," said Brown, looking at the tenderfoot and smiling. "He lost some money playing with me last night, and he is a bit backward about trying it again. But I am a pretty good one with the cards. It is all luck, though, for I always play a straight game."

CHAPTER X.

"You are the proprietor of this place, are you not?" the tenderfoot asked, looking at Brown.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Then it is hardly likely that you would play anything else but a straight game—that is, if you expect to hold your customers."

"You have got that just right. If I lose a little once in a while I never squeal. There is a fascination about draw poker that I can't resist, and I keep right on playing it, win or lose, when I've got the money to do it."

John Bader sat down.

Sparrow did likewise, taking care to get next to Brown. Then Hop stepped up and took a seat.

The tables were fastened to the side of the building at one end, so they sat about it in a sort of semi-circle.

"Me likee play pokée," observed the Chinaman, looking at the tenderfoot and smiling.

"You bet he does!" exclaimed Brown. "He took all the money I had yesterday. But I guess he had an extraordinary streak of luck. At one time he held four aces against the four kings I had."

"Is that so?" and the tenderfoot grew interested at once. Hop looked at him innocently.

"Me velly lucky sometimes," he remarked. "Sometimes me not lucky; len me losee."

"I guess that's the way it is with all of us," laughed Bader.

"How are you in the habit of playing the game?" asked Brown. "Do you count straights?"

"Yes," was the quick reply. "I always like to play the game as far as it goes. A straight flush beats four of a kind, and a royal flush is the best hand out. If there should happen to be two of them, which is something hardly likely to happen, the holders should divide the pot."

"Well, all right. We usually play the other way, but it shall be straight poker here to-night. I am going to look out for a royal flush!"

Hop understood, but he made out that he did not quite know what a royal flush was.

But he could not fool Brown.

The villain was certain that the Chinaman knew everything about draw poker that a man could possibly care to know.

The game began, and for a wonder, both Hop and Brown played square for a while.

It was not until the lamps were lighted that Brown decided to lift a goodly quantity of the tenderfoot's money.

No one had won or lost much, so far, and there had been nothing sensational in the way of hands.

It seemed strange that Hop should decide that it was about time that he did something, just when the gambler leader made up his mind to get in his fine work.

But Hop had been preparing for what he intended to do for the past ten or fifteen minutes.

He had been keeping the cards that would make a royal flush of hearts.

He now had them all in a sort of pocket in his right sleeve.

Strange as it may appear, Ben Brown forgot about the fact that they were playing straight poker.

It was his deal, and he dealt so that the cards of the larger denomination were scattered among the other three players, and took four nines for himself.

This was quite easy for him to do, since the tenderfoot did not think that there was anything wrong, and Hop was not the one to say anything, if he did see it.

The plan was for Sparrow to keep raising the betting a little at a time, and as the tenderfoot was to hold an acefull, it was quite likely that he would go right on with them.

Of course, Brown was not sure what Hop had, though he did know that he had given him a full hand.

But what the foxy Chinaman might have when the call was made was another thing.

However, as we have said, Brown had quite forgotten that they had made it up to play straights, and as none had been shown so far, he felt sure that he had the winning hand with four nines.

It looked more plausible to win with four nines than it did with four aces, he thought.

Just as the betting began Young Wild West walked in with Arietta.

Behind him came Charlie and Jim, and then Stephens showed up.

It was not the sort of a place for a girl, the reader might say, but when it is considered that she had come there for the purpose of getting possession of her stolen watch, and to identify the thief, there was ample cause for her presence in the gambling place.

She was not a bit afraid to come there, for she knew that she would be protected from insult by her dashing young lover.

Brown and Sparrow both turned pale when they saw the newcomers.

There was a smile on the face of our hero, and no one would have suspected that he was there for anything more than curiosity.

"We thought we would drop in and see how the new place was getting along," he said.

Brown breathed a sigh of relief, and quickly retorted:

"I'm sorry there ain't room at the table, so you could take a hand, Young Wild West, for I can tell by the look on your face that you'd like to be in the game."

"Well, I guess I'll go in it, anyhow. Hop, how much money have you got in that pot?"

"Ten dollee ante," answered the Chinaman, who was as much surprised as any of the rest.

"All right! Here's ten dollars. I'll take your place. You are wanted at the camp to help Wing, who is shifting the tents to make room for Mr. Stephens and his men.

Hop got up, and no one objected to the change.

Wild picked up Hop's hand, and saw that it was a royal flush of hearts.

Then he knew just what sort of a game it was, for he took it for granted that the Chinaman was playing to win.

Just how Hop had got the hand made no difference to Young Wild West just then, for he was not going to play the game to win anybody's money.

He was there for the purpose of carrying out the plan he had formed, which was to show up the gamblers in their true form, and get Arietta's watch, at the same time.

The tenderfoot looked at our hero keenly as he sat down. "Ever play the game much?" he ventured.

"Not much," replied the young deadshot. "I only take notions to play once in a while."

"Whose bet is it?" asked the tenderfoot, looking at Sparrow.

"Mine," was the reply. "Brown dealt, you know."

By this time quite a crowd had gathered around the table.

Arietta stood there perfectly calm, with Charlie on one side and Jim on the other.

There was a strange feeling among the lookers-on.

To some of them it seemed as though something startling was going to happen.

And that was right.

Something startling was going to happen.

Unconsciously Ben Brown felt of a pocket in his coat.

Wild saw the movement, and so did Arietta.

It was nothing strange that both should think that the stolen watch was there.

Wild was going to find out, and that shortly.

It was Sparrow's business to run up the betting, so he laid down ten dollars.

The tenderfoot, who had a very good hand, met it, and then raised it fifty.

Wild knew all about the game, and he promptly placed a hundred on the board.

"That makes it forty better," he said.

"Ah," exclaimed Brown, his face taking on its natural color again. "This makes it interesting. I'll just lift it another hundred, so I can tell whether you fellows are bluffing or not."

"I'll have to go what I think my hand's worth," added Sparrow. "I'm goin' ter raise that another hundred."

The tenderfoot was game.

He was not going to let anyone steal the pot on him if he could help it.

He raised it another hundred.

Wild had plenty of money with him, so he calmly raised it another.

It was just then that Brown thought of the way they had started the game.

What if someone held a straight flush against him.

He felt like kicking himself for having forgotten it.

Sparrow had not forgotten how they were playing the game, but he took it for granted that the captain had fixed it so he was bound to win, anyhow.

Brown was so much worried that when it came around to him again he looked at Wild and put down the hundred raise, exclaiming:

"I call you, Young Wild West!"

This was the cue for Sparrow to do likewise, and he had to, anyhow, for he could not bet over a call.

He met it, and so did Bader.

"What have you got, Young Wild West?" asked Brown, nervously.

"A royal flush!" was the startling reply. "Mr. Tenderfoot, just rake in that money for me!"

As our hero showed the cards with his right hand he struck his left against the gambler's pocket.

He felt a watch in it, there was no doubt about it.

Sparrow saw the move on Wild's part, and knowing that the girl's watch was there, he reached over slyly to take it.

But our hero quickly covered him with his revolver.

"Gentlemen," said he, in a ringing tone, "I guess my royal flush wins something more than the pot! Just watch!"

The two gamblers were caught dead to rights.

Charlie covered one, while Wild held the other.

"It is in his coat pocket, Et," Wild said. "Take out your watch. The galoot is a road agent, as well as a gambler."

Our hero scarcely had the words out of his mouth when Arietta's hand went into the pocket of Brown.

Out came the watch, and with an exclamation of delight she held it up so everybody could see it.

"This man stole this from me!" she cried. "He said he was Greg Green, the road agent, but here he is known as Ben Brown, the gambler!"

Crack! Crack!

Two shots rang out just then, and the place was in darkness.

The gamblers had come to the rescue of their captain and Sparrow by shooting out the lights.

Then there was a fierce struggle at the table, and it became overturned.

Wild was afraid Arietta would get hurt, so he let go his hold upon Brown and turned to get his hands on her.

But he could not find her.

The crowd was rushing for the door now, and chairs and tables went over in a hurry.

"Take it easy, boys!" said Wild. "These gamblers have got to be nabbed. They are the galoots who are here to clean out the town. Ropes are waiting for them!"

Just then a chair struck the boy on the head and he went down.

The blow merely dazed him, though, since his hat kept the chair from cutting into his scalp.

But by the time he got up the place was clear.

Someone came running in with a light.

It was Jim Dart.

Three or four men lay on the floor, wounded, for the gamblers had used their knives freely in getting out.

One of the prostrate forms was that of the tenderfoot. He had been struck on the head with a club.

There he lay in an unconscious condition, his hand grasping the money he had raked from the table.

But Arietta was nowhere to be seen.

Wild rushed out, and found Jim running around through the crowd.

The scout followed him.

"Et! Et!" shouted Young Wild West.

A scream rang out from the creek.

"They are taking her to the cave where I found her this morning!" said Jim Dart.

"Well, they will wish they had not!" answered Wild, coming back into his old state of coolness.

The brave boy felt of the bump on his head, and as there was no blood there, he was ready for business.

Things had not turned out exactly as he had planned them, but he was determined that the gamblers must be caught.

Before seizing Ben Brown at the table he had thrust the five cards he had taken from Hop into his pocket.

His royal flush was there yet!

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE CAVE AGAIN.

The very instant the lights went out Sparrow ducked down and got upon the floor.

The villain knew it was his chance to get away, and he meant to take advantage of it.

By some strange luck he ran right against Arietta as he got upon his feet, and acting on a sudden impulse, he caught her in his arms and rushed for the door before the fighting began.

He put his hand over her mouth, and as the girl was clutching her watch in her hands, she could not do much to help herself.

Sparrow made straight for the creek.

Just why he did this he did not know, but it must have been that he had the cave in his mind.

As he reached the bank three of the gamblers came running after him.

They had recognized him, and as he was leading the way somewhere, they had followed him.

They all knew that he had stolen the girl that morning, so when they saw him carrying her away they were not surprised.

As Sparrow stepped into the water one of the villains joined him and helped him hold the struggling girl.

By this time Arietta had got her watch in the pocket of her skirt, and she was now doing her best to get away from the scoundrels.

It was not until she was half-way over the creek, however, before she got a chance to scream.

She would not have managed it then, probably, if she had not heard her dashing young lover shouting to her, and by an extra effort she got the rough hand away from her mouth for an instant.

"Shut up, gal!" exclaimed one of the gamblers. "I'll kill yer if yer holler like that agin!"

Ben Brown came along just then, followed by the rest of his gang.

The villain knew that his shanty was no place for them now, so he depended upon Sparrow to take them to a safe hiding place.

It was quite natural that he should think of the cave on the other side of the creek.

Splashing and slipping, the seven ruffians went across the creek.

Arietta got the chance, and she screamed again.

"All right, Et!" Wild answered.

He was leading the way to the bank of the creek, with a crowd at his heels.

Just as the two gamblers carrying the girl got out on the opposite side Wild jumped into the creek.

Splash—splash!

Charlie and Jim came right after him.

Splash—splash—splash!

Others followed.

But they could not catch the gamblers before they got to the cave.

It was too near at hand for that.

Sparrow led the way, and when he reached it he pushed the girl in ahead of him and crawled after her.

There was where he made a slight mistake.

He must have figured it that Arietta was like the average girl, and that she would not make a fight.

The moment the girl found that she was free from the scoundrel she crawled ahead and got upon her feet.

Out came her revolver in a twinkling.

Like hunted rabbits the gamblers came into the cave.

"Strike a match, someone," said Sparrow. "Ther gal has got away from me!"

One of them quickly struck a match.

There stood Arietta about ten feet away, a leveled revolver in her hand!

The pale face of the beautiful girl shone like that of an avenging Nemesis in the light made by the burning match.

"Back, you scoundrels!" she cried. "I will shoot the first one who tries to touch me!"

"Confound the girl!" exclaimed Brown, as the match went out. "If you had not bothered with her we would be all right, Sparrow. We can hold this place against the whole crowd in Silver Boom, if it is like you said it was."

"It is jest like I said it was, cap," was the retort. "There's only one way ter git in, an' that's ther way we come. If Young Wild West wants his sweetheart let him come in here an' git her."

"He will come! Don't worry about that!" answered Arietta, through the darkness.

The girl knew there was little chance of her getting out of the cave, for she knew how small the opening was, having been there in the daylight.

Just then there came a call from the outside.

It was from Young Wild West.

"Are you fellows willing to surrender?" he asked.

"No!" answered Brown. "You can't get us, and you know it. There is only one thing for you fellows to do,

and that is to quit the game and let us come back in peace. You can have the girl if you agree to that."

"Don't agree to it, Wild!" shouted Arietta. "I have the best of them! I am free in the cave, and I hold my revolver ready to shoot the first one that dares come near me!"

"All right, Et!" answered her lover. "I guess it won't take us long to get the scoundrels. If they dare to harm you one bit they'll suffer all the more for it."

But Sparrow did not propose that the girl should have it all her own way.

It was dark as pitch in the cave, and he figured it that he could creep up and knock the revolver from her hand.

He might have done this if Arietta had remained in the same spot she stood in when she called out to Wild.

But she did not. She moved softly to another corner of the cave.

There was a faint light coming through the crack in the face of the bluff in this particular part of the cave, and she now would be able to catch sight of any creeping form.

She stood with her back against the corner of the rocky cave, determined to shoot the first man who interfered with her.

Sparrow crawled around until he found that she had changed her position.

Then he began moving around the cave, keeping close to the wall.

In this way he was bound to come upon the girl.

The gambler was taking desperate chances, but he did not seem to think so.

Suddenly Arietta caught a glimpse of something moving near her feet.

The next instant a hand touched her skirt, and then a grab was made at her.

Crack!

The brave girl fired unhesitatingly.

With a shriek of mortal agony Sparrow rolled over on the ground.

He had done the worst he could and death was the result.

Arietta quickly changed her position after firing the shot.

It was really wonderful how cool the girl was.

"The she-fiend has shot him, I guess," Brown said in a low voice, but not so low but that Arietta could hear it.

The villains began to lose heart.

There was an interval of silence, during which Arietta watched the mouth of the cave, as well as the six villains.

Suddenly there was a hissing noise, and then a shower of sparks flew into the cave.

Bang!

A big cracker exploded.

Arietta knew who had done that.

Hop Wah had been sent for.

This was indeed the fact.

Wild had sent for him as soon as they got across the

creek, and made sure that the villains and Arietta were in the cave.

Hop was always ready for such emergencies.

The explosion caused much fright and confusion among the gamblers.

They ran in every direction.

Arietta thought her chance had come, and she bounded for the entrance.

But just then in came another streak of fire.

That cut her off and allowed the villains to see her.

Becoming desperate, one of them fired at her.

Arietta dropped, but not because she was hit.

She made out she was, though, and when the villains heard nothing from her they really thought she was dead.

"Now, boys, it's a clear case of do or die!" exclaimed Brown. "We won't stand a ghost of a show if they get us, so the only thing to do is to fight it out, and if we can't win we'll die."

Arietta took advantage of the darkness that settled down after the last visitation of the fireworks and began crawling out of the cave.

She was half-way through when her head bumped against another head.

"Et!" said a voice in a low whisper.

"Wild!" she cried out, regardless of the fact that the villains would hear her.

It was Wild, sure enough.

He caught her by the arms and pulled her outside in a jiffy.

He was not an instant too soon, either, for three shots were fired, and one of the bullets came out past the ears of our hero.

Brown and his companions now knew that the girl had fooled them, and that she had made her escape.

The villains were really glad of it, for they knew that if they were captured they would be hanged or shot to death in short order, if it was found that they had killed the girl.

Brown now tried to use persuasion on our friends.

"Young Wild West," he asked, "you've got the girl, now what else do you want?"

"We want you!" came the reply.

"You won't give us a chance to light out from the town."

"I can't do that. You must not think that I have got all to say about it."

"The miners will do anything you say about it; I know they will."

"Never mind about that. You have tried your best to kill the young lady, and now that you find that you failed, you want to get off. You can't get off, Ben Brown, or Greg Green! If we can't get you out of that cave alive you will be dragged out dead, for our Chinaman is going to blow up the cave in a few minutes."

This caused the villains to grow more desperate than they had yet been.

They began firing at the entrance, in the hopes that the bullets might find targets.

But they were but wasting their ammunition.

Crack—crack—crack!

The shots rang out in rapid succession.

Bang!

Another big cracker exploded inside the cave.

"Bettee comee outee, allee samee nicee lilee boys!" piped the voice of Hop from the outside. "Me likee play um dlaw pokée with Misler Brown."

Crack!

Brown fired in the hope of hitting the Chinaman, but his bullet merely hit the rocky wall of the cave.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Nearly the entire population of the mining camp had crossed the creek now.

Everybody knew who and what the gamblers were by this time, and the miners were eager to lynch them.

Though he had been saved from being robbed by Young Wild West and Cheyenne Charlie, Stephens, the money-man and speculator, was very bitter against them.

The tenderfoot was one of the last to come over.

Someone kindly tied up his head, and he held on to the money he had taken from the table.

Arietta had been escorted across the creek by Wild, while Hop was working the last of his fireworks.

Our hero did not want to kill the men in the cave in any brutal or savage way.

He wanted to get them out and let a judge and jury try them.

Of course, it was easy enough to imagine what the verdict would be.

Big Zack was a sort of leader among the miners, and when he proposed that they stick a fuse in a keg of powder, light it, and then roll it into the cave, a howl of approval went up.

"Wait, boys," exclaimed Wild, who came across from the other side just in time to hear the proposition. "That would be too barbarous. Let us try and think of another way to get them out. Perhaps if you were to tell them that you are going to blow them up with powder they might surrender."

"Well, all right, then," answered Big Zack, and getting as close to the mouth of the cave as he dared, he yelled out:

"Brown, I've got this business in my hands now, an' I want ter tell yer that if yer don't come out an' stand trial we've got a keg of powder ready ter roll in there an' blow yer inter pieces! Yer want ter make up your mind putty quick. What do yer say?"

"Will we have a fair trial?" came the reply from the gambler leader in a voice that trembled slightly.

"As fair as was ever held in a minin' camp."

"If you'll let Young Wild West be judge I'll agree to surrender," came the answer. "I put enough faith in

him to trust my life in his hands. I know he will give a man a fair shake."

"How about it, Mister West?" asked Big Zack.

"Oh, I'll be the judge, then," was our hero's reply.

"Young Wild West says he'll be ther jedge!" shouted the big miner."

"All right! Then we'll surrender."

The crowd lined up on either side of the little opening. In less than half a minute Brown came out.

He arose to his feet and stood with folded arms.

His weapons were taken from him, and then he was quickly bound.

One after another, the other five came out.

"There were seven of 'em," wasn't there?" asked Big Zack.

"Ther gal shot Sparrer, jest as he was goin' ter grab her," exclaimed one of the gamblers. "He's dead as a door-nail inside."

"That is right," spoke up our hero.

The six prisoners were marched across the creek and lined up in front of the shanty they had constructed.

Wild was doing considerable thinking while all this was taking place.

He was to be the judge, but he did not feel like condemning the gamblers to death.

Though they had tried to kill Arietta in a moment of desperation, they had failed.

That was a charge of attempted murder.

The other two charges were the stealing of Arietta's watch and the attempt to hold up and rob Stephens.

Outside of these charges there was nothing against the gamblers.

Big Zack insisted on a trial right away.

"All right," Wild answered. "Now, since you have selected me for the judge, I suppose I can pick out the jury?"

"Sartin," answered the big miner.

Wild went around among the men and selected those he thought would deal squarely with the prisoners.

There were twelve of them, and he got them to stand in front of the barrel he was to sit upon as the judge of the court.

More lamps had been brought to the scene, and it was now almost as light as day.

Big Zack acted as the prosecutor.

"Jedge," said he, "here is six of ther worst villains that ever drawed ther breath of life, a-waitin' ter be hung!"

"Make your charge against them," answered Wild coolly.

"Well, they stole a gal's watch, an' then they stole ther gal herself. Then they held up a man what had a big wad of money. An' then they steals ther same gal agin an' tried hard ter kill her."

"The girl will step up as the first witness," said Wild, who made up his mind to run the court in accordance with his ways of thinking.

Arietta stepped forward.

She told just what had happened to her.

"Where is the man who twice caught you and carried you across the creek?" Wild asked.

"He is dead," was the reply.

"All right. That removes the charge against the rest of them, then. They simply helped to get you over the creek the second time you were taken there, I believe."

"Yes."

"Well, Mr. Prosecutor, you will have to change the charge. Make it that these six men assisted and willingly acted in conjunction with the man who stole the girl the second time."

"All right," retorted Big Zack; "you're ther jedge."

He scratched his head, as though he did not just know what to do about it.

"That will do for the first witness," said Wild. "Mr. Stephens, step up."

Stephens did so.

"What charge do you make against these villains?"

"They tried to rob me—or three of them did," was the reply.

"Which are the three?"

"I don't know. They wore masks at the time."

"That is all. I happen to know myself that three of them did try to rob the witness," our hero went on, addressing the jury, "but since they did not rob him, you can't call it a crime. I recommend that you bring in a verdict of attempted robbery and helping in a case of abduction."

Then the jury began to deliberate.

It did not take them long to find a verdict.

The miner who had been selected as the foreman stepped up to Wild and said:

"We bring in a verdict of guilty, jedge."

"All right. Then the sentence of the court is that the six men be given two hours to settle up their business in this town and get out of it!"

Then there ensued a lively time.

More than half the men were opposed to the verdict.

But Wild made it his business to go among them, with Stephens and Arietta to back him, and put out the argument that they were the only ones who had been endangered, and that they ought to have the right to decide the question.

It was near midnight before it was settled that the verdict and sentence should stand.

Then the prisoners were liberated.

Stephens came up and offered Brown what it had cost him to put up his shanty, and the shanty was sold right then and there.

"Now, Brown," said Wild, "I suppose you have me to thank for saving you and your friends. I don't know whether you appreciate it or not, but I want to tell you one thing! If I ever run across either of you again and find that you are not living honest lives I am going to shoot you dead!"

"That is fair enough," retorted the leader of the gamblers. "I'll guarantee you, Young Wild West, that if I ever get the chance to do you a good turn I'll do it, whether I'm living an honest life or not. You can depend on that. I only hope I will get the chance to do you a good turn. When I named this shanty the Square Deal House' I didn't mean that anybody would get a square deal here. I never knew what a square deal was until to-night. You have taught me what it was!"

Brown did not linger long after that.

He mounted his horse, and so did the rest.

Then they rode out of the camp, taking the trail to Cheyenne.

It was shortly after this that a curious sort of singing was heard in the camp.

"It's Hop on a drunk!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie. "How in thunder did he git it so quick? He was jest as sober as he could be when he was shootin' off them fire-crackers in ther cave over there."

They walked over to the saloon where Hop had first played cards with Brown, and found the Celestial doing a song-and-dance in front of the building.

The miners were grinning and cheering him on, and everybody was in a good humor.

"Me allee light!" yelled Hop. "Me allee samee Young Wild West! Me shootee likee bully boy with um glassee eye! Hoolay!"

He became so excited that he fell down then, and the crowd started to pull him into the saloon to give him more tanglefoot.

But Wild gently remonstrated with them, and succeeded in getting the Chinaman away from them.

Hop had been of great service to them in getting Arietta out of the cave, but he would get under the influence of liquor, and there seemed to be no way of stopping him.

The next morning Wild gave the money he had lost back to the tenderfoot.

He only took what he had put in the pot himself, and the rest was handed over to Hop.

It belonged to the Chinaman, if it did to anybody, for it was he who had first held Young Wild West's Royal Flush.

THE END.

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